

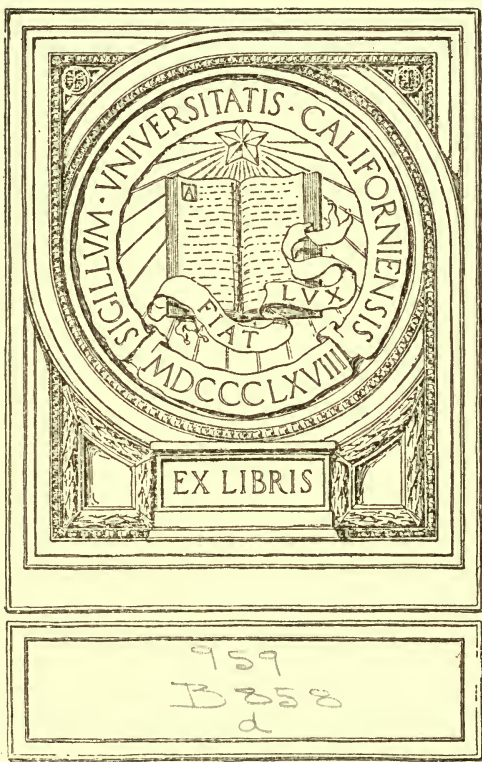
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DOWN THE RIVER

R. W. BRINK



DOWN THE RIVER

BY
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JUST SO YOU'LL KNOW

Perhaps you don't think these things,
I'm writing about,
Really
Happened
To me;
But I tell you they did, every last one of them. . . .
I had dreams
Of what was going to be
When I left the country,
A girl,
For the City,
Down the River;
I was glad to get away,
Away to the noise of voices;
Away to the clatter of crowds
Making you feel it was an old round dance
You was in;
Away to the singing, whispering, murmuring
Of many lights;
Away to where so many neighbors were
You never, never could be lonely;
Away to where people would see me

And know me and call me;
Away to where—
Oh, the wonderful city that men and women
Were building:
Themselves strong, themselves big,
Themselves not bending like my father
To the mercy of wind and rain
And sun and cold,
Like a lonely man on an empty hilltop—
No—no—not like that so lonely—
But close, close to people,
Laughing and singing and talking and dancing,
And doing,
Like they was all off on a picnic
Together;
Doing things
They wanted to do. . . .
Well, it was some picnic I found
Down to the City,
Down the River:
And here it is. . . .



SPRING



GOING

"We got to be going, Belle."

From far off to me

His voice seems to come:

It's Len's and we've just been married.

Out of the mixture of voices in the room,

Sounding like they had no people behind them,

Len's words pick at me again:

"Boat leaves at six o'clock, Belle;

It don't wait for nobody."

I say good-by to the minister and his wife.

Pah and Mah with the old horse

Are waiting for us outside;

Pah, he's looking at his horse's ears,

And Mah, she ain't saying nothing either—

Only smoothing down her silken mit,

Up; and down; up; and down

The back of her hand.

"Well, here we are again," says Len.

"Holl-up!" says Pah to his horse,

Sharp and gratingly,

So it makes me jerk and look at him

Like I had just come out of a dream.

Len helps me in and we start—
Suddenly the church-bell begins to ring,
Rings as though the sky would break
And all the stars fall down.

“What’s that, Len?”

“We just been married, ain’t we?” says Len,
With a funny little laugh in his throat.

“But—but, we didn’t have a church wedding—
We was married in the parsonage?”

“Gave the sexton half-a-dollar

To do it though,” says Len;

And he grins back at the steeple

Lone and white among its trees

Where they stand green and shivery gray

Against the solid, throbbing, pulsing wave

Of great Blue Mountain

That always seems to make me short of breath

When I look at it.

“Oh. . . .”

Fainter and fainter grows the bell;

Stillier and stillier beats my heart;

Pah’s horse goes slow

And Blue Mountain keeps up with us for a long time,

Then we turn our backs on it

Where the road turns

Down to the River—

Seems like I can’t bear to see Blue Mountain

Leaving me far and farther away like that;
But I am going and I can't stop now—
It's no use to turn my head and look
After it. . . .

Suddenly, there's the River,
Blue-green between the hills;
And there's our boat
Like a little and white fairy palace
Floating in the shadow of the hills. . . .
Oh! I'm going down the River
Down to the City
Down with my husband—
He looks at me and smiles proudly. . . .
We say good-by—Pah and Mah and me.
"Take good care of the girl," says Pah;
And then they go,
Up the long hill road
Out of sight. . . .

HUSBAND AND WIFE

Our boat is moving down the River
Down to the City:
Len and me are sitting in the back

Where we can see the trail of the wake—
Like my bridal-veil, you might say,
If I hadn't been married in the parsonage
And had one.

"But what's that to us," says Len;
I put my hand in his and press it,
My eyes feeling like they're hard to see with.
Sunset is on Blue Mountain,
All so gold and the palest rose;
Lavender and blue and purple
Are the hills beside the river,
Hills stretching out like arms
With Blue Mountain's bended head upon them. . . .
Darkness creeps from out the river
Like the shadows from the hall
When our living-room is lighted,
Back at home,
Under Blue Mountain.
Houses on the banks along the river
Stand and flit like ghosts behind us.
The sky is full of stars above us.
The night is soft and sweet
With many whispers. . . .
Cool and soft upon my cheek. . . .
His warm hand is still in mine. . . .
"Let's go in, Belle. . . ."
White and gold and red plush

In the parlors and the halls

Of the boat:

"Ain't it fixed up nice, Len?"

"Here's our room . . .?"

Strange, haunted voices speak outside;

Speak and answer again

Swiftly like twilight birds

Out of our swamp-plot at home. . . .

The boat trembles and surges

With every throb of the engines;

And now my heart is trembling

And surging, too—

He stands there looking at me.

We are alone.

Outside from the white and plush and gold

A strange, weird laugh strikes! . . .

And then it comes to me!—

We ain't alone!

"Can't—can't we wait, Len—

Till we get home . . . and alone?"

"We are alone"—

That queer little laugh in his throat—

"Man and wife," he says. . . .

IN HIS EYES

I guess morning is here now,
Judging by the sickish light that straggles in
Through the crooked openings above my head
In the cabin walls of the boat.
I lie wondering what it means,
This feeling of something—
I don't know just what—
So queer and different that I can't touch,
Though I know it's near me.
Len leans on his elbow and listens,
Says, "It's morning
In the City."
That must be it—"in the City."
I hear it coming now
Towards me, down ever and ever so many streets,
Like a heavy team of stone
On the north road when winter has made it hard.
Morning—that's what it is;
Only I am used to it coming so quiet
Over our long east hill,
Up the River.
So we are down to the City. . . .
"We—we should have waited, Len—"
But he is looking at his watch;
He isn't paying any attention,

Just looks away
As if he was worrying,
And then it comes on me, the feeling:
I am all alone,
Though he is so near me.
Then we dress and go out on deck,
Into the tarry, stably smell of the docks
That are black sprawly things
Shrinking away from the river—
A heavy, green soup, splotched with grease—
Shrinking away till the big brick houses
Crunch down on them and force them back,
Houses colored like an old rag with blood dried on it.
At last we reach the streets
That crawl like things in a bad dream. . . .
The bells on our horse-car jangle
Till I shiver at them
Running like ants under my clothes.
Len looks at his watch again,
With that uneasy look in his eyes
That have forgotten me—
“We will soon be home now,” he says.

HOME

So this is home!

And it will be mine to make what I can of it,

Mine for the rest of my life,

Mine—

Down to the City I dreamed about

Up there in the quiet hills under Blue Mountain.

Mine—well, maybe it is,

As the old woman said when she marked her pies:

“T. M.—’tis mince,

T. M.—’taint mince.”

You can’t tell which it is.

Just one in—

Red brick after red brick, row after row,

All one streetful of windows,

That look like they were threatening you.

On our whole block, there’s only one tree

And it don’t look like it belongs there,

With its weedy leaves like the arrow-points

Father used to plow up in the Spring,

With its bark a leprous green all around,

Like it faced the north on every side.

Seems like the only one in the City

And near as lonely as I am,

Not that I ain’t neighbors,

If that’s what you call them,

Above me and below me
And each side of me.
But they ain't the same as we count neighbors
Up the River.
As far as I can see, just women like me,
Waiting for their men to come home,
Waiting till they have to call the doctor
For another baby,
Waiting, like I waited up the River
For Len to come home and take me
Down to the City,
My head all full of wonderful things,
Like a girl's is. . . .
Neighbors?
Seems like it's all north here.

COMING HOME

I am waiting for him,
To come home;
Tiredly I sit
With my hand slowly pulsing in my lap,
And watch the frosty square upon the wall
Of white light falling slantingly;

Tiredly my eyes follow the white path
To the arc-lamp nailed upon a stick
They've hacked to such a bitter straightness
And put across the street.
He comes home at last,
From his work.
Oh, the man I love,
I can be alone with him—alone:
But when he takes me in his arms
The City takes me, too,
With the working smell and odors of his day.
His strong warm arms,
That fit every softening curve of me:
And then those other crushing arms,
I sense but cannot see,
That hold me too;
So we are alone, we three.
Over his shoulder I can see
The crawling patterns on the papered wall:
The windows with edges of brick
Their red like burnt pie-crust;
Beyond them the evening city,
Huddled like a tired woman
Staring down upon her waiting hands,
Her dark hair streaming
Down across her shoulder, round about her breasts,
Old with the brown of many suckled children.

The City—but I want to be alone with Len.
All day long I have cooked and cleaned,
Waited for him to come;
All day long he has worked for me:
Each for the other.
But what are we together working for?
The brooding City does not lift her head,
Or say.

BOOKS AND THINGS

“Always get your work done first, Belle.”
So I wash the supper dishes while he dries them;
He takes his evening paper;
Turns the gas just high enough
To get the flame’s best flare—
“So, Belle,
Not too high to make the meter wheels spin round,
For they don’t care how much money you burn,
So long as you give it to them.”
He sits down where the gas-light, like a lily
In the snake-meadow down by the creek at home,
Yellows over his head.
I get my book, too,—

Longfellow's poems.

"I got it from the library this very afternoon;
You know, Len, in that nice little house
At the corner of Miggle Street and Palace Avenue;
It is so homey, like you read about, and quiet
inside,

With ferns and pictures and the smell of books;
Just as if you owned them;
All the books I ever dreamed of reading,
When the snow came almost up to the pantry window
Up the River:
A certain rich man gave the building and the books;
I think it's a good thing there are rich men
To do such things for us."

"Maybe—

But I'd like to buy my own books."

Absently he looks at the books we own:

"Gaskell's Compendium of Forms,"

Lying there on the stand in the corner,

Between the "History of the World," in One Volume,

And the big Bible, all shiny and gold,

His father's wedding present to us.

Only the other night he took it over to the table,

And wrote in it:

"Born a—"

And stopped,

Smiling as he blew upon the ink to dry it;

For there was nothing more he could write, yet.
He turned the pages idly for a while;
Rose and put the Good Book back;
“Bed time, Belle,” he said.

THE CITY GROWS

The City—what does it care—
One child the more;
Or one woman the less;
“What’s that you say, doctor—
Ah!
Why don’t you do something, why?
You—you—you are here to help me—
Oh—
So tired—doctor, and weak like;
That pain again,
Like dull butcher knives, hacking—
Oh—
Can’t—can’t—can’t you do som—
Oh—
God!—Why?—why?”
That queer sweet smell, what—
“More, please—please—doctor—”

That queer, sweet scent that helps me so;
Quiet; intense forgetfulness. . . .

"That cry!

Let me see it!

A boy?—mine—

Boy. . . ."

"Father's name?—age?—yes?

Mine?

The birth certificate, doctor?"

"Yes."

Oh, so the City does care!

What is it going to do for my son?

"Is that all?

Please, Len, give him back to me—

You might hurt him;

See, Len, he knows, he knows;

Mother's precious, little man. . . ."

MILES AND MILES

The black snow is gone;

The streets are full of noise again;

It must be Spring now, up the River—

With Dry Brook smacking over the black rocks

Under the bridge on that little road
Leading to nowhere back of the barn.
The streets are clacking dry again.
Him in his carriage and me,
We follow a hurdy-gurdy for blocks
To watch the children dancing in the sun.
A high curb and a policeman helps us over,
Smiling down at him muffled in his robes.
Miles and miles of windows, seems like
Glinting in the sun; must be Commercial Street,
Where the big stores are.
I turn to watch a cable-car go by,
Scampering like a little colt
After old Fan when father turns her out
To pasture with the cows.
Spring is up the River.
The big, bright windows—
Spring is here, too.
I sense it and a warm rich feeling comes
That gathers mist before my eyes.
And here's a little square,
Some homesick green and trees,
An iron railing, painted funny orange red;
My, how good the sky looks here.
I sit and watch the city going by,
While I put the little fellow to my breast.
The City muttering in a dream of far-off things—

But come, sonny, we must be going now;
To see the windows, like flowers they are,
Along the village road at home:
Sinbad's cave and the treasures of the Forty Thieves,
For any one to look at and think what she would
 buy
If she had money.
But who knows, soon, some day . . . some day.
But suddenly—
Where do all those people come from,
Like a Spring freshet,
Rushing from Commercial Street,
Pouring blackly down the sluices of the side-streets?
They must be going home from work—
I will be late with supper.

RAIN

Rain, we of the city have forgotten you;
We who once prayed for you,
And thanked you in the green fields,
We have forgotten you. . . .
The sky is crooning low over the city;
On the rain-wet pavements daffodils grow,

Springing in girlish riot
After the pattering feet of the rain.
Across the way a drain-pipe
Leans down from a slanting roof,
A gargoyle, in stubby incompleteness
Just like the people in our neighborhood ;
It spills the eager splash upon the side-walk
Letting loose a hurly-burly brook
For the passer-by,
Lonely and cloistered in the weaving rain,
Lonely and laden with the hurry-go of the city,
To wade his burden through.
It is a long, long day :
Mrs. Moriarity's whole week is ruined ;
For this is always her wash-day
And mine, and every one else's I guess.
Even Len will come home wet and cross,
Out of the rain's sweet loveliness,
Out of the city's wakeful sleepiness,
Cold and cross till he remembers again
The rain upon the shingle-roof
Over the trundle-bed of his childhood,
Under the garret's sloping music
Up the River.

OUT ON STRIKE

“Stay home with me, Len;
Don’t go out to-day
See the clothes I left on the line last night,
How gray they are with the chimney smoke,
That means a southwest wind, raw and cold;
Do stay home with me.
We’ve got money in the bank;
So we won’t starve yet a while.”
If only I can keep him home;
He’s all right while he’s safe with me;
But after he’s been out with the others,
He comes home like a wild beast,
His eyes all blood-shot.
The boys are out on strike
For higher wages and a Union.
This morning I hid his rifle
In the bottom of my trunk,
He talked so wild last night.
“It’s hanted to be so,” I tell him,
“For men to have bosses who won’t understand.
Up the river they don’t strike
When a season’s bad and rain
Rots the potatoes in the hill,
Or sours the hay upon the field,
Or maybe is so dry the buckwheat don’t top out:

It's hanted that way
And can't be helped."
"That's all right up the River,
But that ain't here," says he;
"A boss ain't God.
He's just another one of us
The City called, to make it true
That we ourselves are chance and fate and God;
We are the sowers and the wheat,
The weather and the soil,
So long's we keep to the city,
Making it be what all we are and do and plan."
That's Len, but I don't know;
When he talks like that
It seems to me the city ain't got roots,
Like the big tree we have in church at Christmas
time,
With lights and silver stars tied onto it
By the sexton playing Santa Claus,
With presents for the officers of the Sunday School:
For the Superintendant another rocking-chair
To match the one he got last year
And the year before that.
But I don't mind his talking that way
Now—
So long's he stays home with me.

ON OUR BLOCK

Len won't see it,
But they are so funny,
The people on our block and round the corner;
Just like out of Dickens:
Old Peter Biebermann,
Smelly corn-cob pipe stuck in his suspender buckle,
Shaking his head gravely and proudly—
“By golly, my ol'est boy's a man now,
Would you effer believe it,
Took him to barber-shop las' night,
Give him his firs' shave, ha ha!
Nex' year another one yet, ain't I lucky?”
Tony, the vegetable man on the corner,
Head bobbing like a toy rabbit's on a spring—
“Buy-a da pepper for da boss, eh?
My-a wife?—oh, she ain't-a feeling so fine,
Make-a da babe again.”
The silent man in the little shop across the way,
Making glass eyes for wooden horses,
Every day when the ice-man stops his team,
Adam—that's his name, Adam Kosciusco
Painted in black and yellow letters on the window—
Adam stalks twice up and down his bit of side-walk,
Sets his lips and goes to the horse at the curb,
Blinks up into his eyes,

Mutters disapprovingly,
Stalks back to his bench beside the door,
Morning after morning.
Then there's Mrs. Cohen who says she must keep
 thin
Or her husband won't love her anymore,
So she runs twice around the block
Every morning before breakfast,
In her petticoats, and, when she sees
The policeman, waving her hand girlishly
And shouting gaily, "Oh, there you are, helloah."
And Art Barmer, who does everything
From hand-painting roses on wedding dresses,
To selling patent dish-rags of his own make,
Or making new swinging doors for the Grand Café.
He went downtown once with a friend
To get a marriage license for himself,
He got instead a lottery ticket,
His friend got the license,
And the girl.
Then there's the little boy who walks
At nine-fifteen every day by our door,
So jerkingly and independent like,
As he looks down with slant-eyed pity
At the other children playing in the gutter—
He's carrying a dozen vests to the sweater.
Or twice a month regular, Mrs. Dubenique,

Who comes to sell me needles and thread,
So old she can't stand straight—
“Yes, lady, I know you don't want nothing,
But you are so sociable to talk to,
I can't get sociable with the others,
Sure, I'll have some coffee,
Me, I don't need nothing much,
He left me some money by his will,
His widow, she don't like that much either,
But he's left her rich and she should care,
I should tell her once how him and me was lovers,
When he was alive,
And she didn't know it by Long Branch,
I had style then, lady,
Sure, buy some needles,
Just for friendship's sake, Lady.”
Or on our hall landing,
My small boy pounding a bridge,
Or something,
Out of a stone and two bent sticks—
“What's all the noise about up there?”
Roars the old man down on the first floor,
Up the crooked darkness of the stair-well—
“Eh? What's all that noise down there?”
Yells the small boy down upon the irate head,
Pursing his lips again to hit a louder blow.
I guess we'll have to move once more,

Packing into the midnight our dishes and things,
Along with the little catchings of the heart
Because of old attachments.

I nearly walked my feet off last time,
In the acrid streets rubbing their red heat on me,
Looking for a place to live:
Nobody wants to take in children;
I can't blame them.

SMALL STREETS

I wander down a small street,
Where life goes marching by,
Seeking a house for Len and me and them.
Seems like some old things shall perish
And some old things shall stay;
And that is the way of the small street
At the tip of the long gray shadow
That falls from the hill-high towers
Sharp as the clang of brass
In the street where the many pass.
Of steel and stone are the towers,
Of age and dreams are the houses
Lining the street of ancient ways

Where life goes marching by.
That old home speaks magic,
Standing across the way
Like a sage of a by-gone glory,
Who takes his snuff and mutters.
Across the narrow way—
Such a quaint old old magician
Decked with his scroll and moon,
Jig-saw emblems dark and haunted.
I am glad of the high-built towers
That preen in the level suns,
But gladder still of the small street
Where I hear the steady beating
Of the great, young City's heart,
The beat that is drowned in the traffic
Of the street where the many pass,
The street that laughs and chatters
Blinding itself to the final truth,
That it, too, shall come a small street—
Which life goes marching by
Even as this the least of them
Now at the shadow's tip—
A quiet street, an old street,
Where one shall go hereafter
To wander down a small street
And sense the beat of the city's heart.
A seeker who shall come like me,

Glad that there is a small street,
A place where one may live.

IN THE NIGHT

The shriek of whistles in the night!
"Quick, papuh, fire!"
A patter of elfin feet to the window;
And then we come, too.
The windows are gray with white bodies that lean;
Swift voices and the flash of eyes. . . .
A slashing of mad bells that come;
A crackle of racing hoofs upon the pavement;
A whisper of hurrying feet that trail after,
But keeping the beat
The voices syncopate with quick excitement;
A nervous breathing into the dark
Of a drunken breath aflame;
Dying slowly in its own debauch;
The short retreating bells;
A slow recessional of shuffling feet
Beneath that steady lyric thing,
The human voice so well delighted
With its celebration of this midnight hour

And the sudden liberty of another man's catastrophe.
Back again to bed
To begin the night all over:
His arms again—
That sleep has made more gentle,
But the excitement,
Set free by the sudden burst of people meeting,
Eager again.
There is no escape from them.

CHILDREN

"What are you going to do about it?"
"I don't know, but I ain't—
I've had all I'm going to have."
"Your mother had six—
My mother has ten—or more."
"That's up the River;
This is th' City, Len."
"Forgetting your marriage 'greements, ain't you?
I'm your husband, ain't I?
Man ought to have some rights in his own house."
"Don't you dast come nearer me a step."
He laughs and comes on;

But he stops when he sees
The bread-knife in my hand.
And stares
And stares while I get into bed with it.
He turns on his heel;
The street-door bangs below,
So you hear it all over the house.
What will the neighbors think?
I cannot sleep,
Only think and think;
Till I get up and put the knife back on the table.
The sheets are hot and rough to the touch;
Black snakes crawl in a dark hole over my head;
By-and-by he comes in again;
I hear him stop and feel on the table;
And fling his breath through his nose.
When he fumbles to bed beside me, I close my eyes,
Making believe I am asleep;
He turns on his side with a jerk;
I hear him thinking to himself
Until he falls asleep,
In the sick of the morning.
Now every night when he takes his paper
Or when he dries the dishes for me
He hums a little song without a tune,
That crackles into words sometimes—
“She said she loved him truly

But she really didn't care. . . ."
I wish it had a tune.

HIS GIRL

Sun like roman-gold upon the side-walks;
People passing by to Sunday Services,
People molded to the stiff white starch upon them,
Their every step a forethought,
Like the man-dressed maidens of the queen,
In the children's fairy book,
Passing through the room of scattered peas
That should prove them women
If they stepped not firmly on them
Under the eyes of the watching king;
People in nervous tension by the sudden halt of
 Sunday,
With their hours shuffling by in half-step,
Waiting without patience for
The full swing of the route step
That the whistles order on a Monday morning.
My boys at the window,
All a quiver like harp strings
Murmuring to the apprehensive fingers

Of the restless city plucking absent-mindedly,
Spooky little playthings
Of my City of romance;
Wanting to do something;
Knowing not what it is;
Waiting for me, or the City
To tell them.

"Look, mother! come quick;
There's pahpuh's girl;
He talked to her the other night
Down where we had the bonfire."
Len beside them now,
Bending like the gargoyles of Hugo's "Notre Dame"
To bring his face near to theirs and see.

"Mahmuh is pahpuh's girl;
You mustn't talk like that."

"There on the corner, mahmuh!"

"But, Belle, I wouldn't let the children see
If I had another girl, would I?"

"Oh, I don't know."

"Boys, you mustn't give your father away like that."

"You see! you admit it."

"Tell mahmuh how long I talked with her."

"Oh, a long while."

It is good to tease Len

About pahpuh's girl;

Of course, I know there is nothing to it:

Only an accidental meeting around a 'lection fire;
Len's too close to keep a wife in comfort,
Much less have a girl.
But the children—I don't know.
Is this all the City has made clear to them—
Pahpuh's girl;
And I must be sure to see?

THE PLAY

A steady mill-pond of voices,
Clattering gaily in the light;
Suddenly a sweep of darkness out of nowhere;
A hush like in church,
Pouncing on us like a hawk, exultantly,
Down out of his empty sky where terror flies.
In the rows in front of us here and there,
Heads that gently bend together in the dark,
Touching so deliciously you yourself can feel
The warm sweet flood that flushes upward,
Catch the vagrant scent of hair as it gropes
Tremblingly.
We are waiting in the dark,
As at the Beginning of the First Day;

Down there in front where the stage is,
A hedge of black with lights behind,
That softly feel their way up the curtain
Like a blush when you were young.
The curtain rises slowly;
Soft, sweet tides creep through me
Like when I first knew something wonderful
Was going to happen to me.
I hardly breathe for fear I wouldn't hear
What they are saying. . . .
Of course he's only acting,
But he shouldn't have done it;
He should have known all the time;
That's what love is;
Can you blame her?
Served him right!
Why does she do it then?
Oh, of course, they must be happy, I suppose.
Why do they clap their hands so?
I would be silent,
As the tears in my eyes,
As my heart is,
Lying in my breast so contentedly and coolly.
The crowd drones out to the door;
Bubbles into the street.
One deep breath of utter content
Of a thing you've hungered for and didn't know it.

Far away is the laughter and clamor about me;
Near me, nearer me, is the city.
The lights are all magic;
I cannot see the stars,
And seems like I don't want to.
Down the dark side-streets go the light footfalls
Of unreal things.
Makes me feel so homey like about the heart
Just to go with the crowds.
I don't know where I am, till Len:
"We'd better be getting home, Belle;
Hattie with the children
Will be wondering where we are."
We go down into a side-street, too;
The world fades away behind us,
Under its glory in the sky.

EMPTY MANSION

The Empty Mansion we call it,
Standing alone in our neighborhood
Like a stranger dog
Nosed and snuffled at suspiciously

By the squalid houses that circle it round.
Broad and deep are its silent lawns,
A range of green so strange behind its iron bars
It takes me with a swift surprise
Each time I hurry down the hard hot street
With head bent against the lashing of the sun,
So strange, that I draw back
As from a sudden stagnant pool scummed with green.
All about the Mansion—trees,
Prying into many unseeing windows,
Trees,—and our houses throbbing in the sun
Like convict heads, shaven and bare.
So many rooms it has;
So much emptiness to echo uselessly—
Oh, why can't the rich build their houses
So they can be handed down to us who come after,
Who come after always and always.
Even though they build for eternity
A home for them and their children alone,
We come after, crowding after:
For we are eternity and they are the wilderness.
So why do they build them places
The poor are too many to use;
Why so much emptiness in Empty Mansion
To stand remotely among our houses,
Throbbing like narrow sun-beaten heads

Dizzy with a much too crowded drama
Which is the life of us,
Who live like rabbits in our breeding boxes.

THE STORY

Twilight is twining down out of the smoke,
Sadly and softly down through the openness
Over the loneliness of Empty Mansion.
I seem to see the old place
Young again—years ago,
When other lawns were where our houses are.
Empty Mansion, the New Mansion then,
Every window yellowed with candle-light
In tinklings of crystal;
The roll of coaches on the pavement,
The castanetting of the hoofs,
Lights upon the lawns broad in the twilight,
People passing in the golden dusk;
Shimmer of satin and silk
Against the farther dark that fills the distance up
With a color of weathered bronze;
Flicker of voices like fire-flies in the night;
Viol and 'cello and flute

Calling and calling and calling to the dance;
She the fairest of them all;
Dancing into her father's proud new halls,
Seeing only the man she loved;
Dancing out again,
The eyes of her over his shoulder,
Deep and wide, liquid with the gleam
Of the moment's wilful secret
In the candle-light;
A flicker in the tinkling crystal overhead;
A flash on the pebbled path;
Dim shapes like music come to life;
The crackle of a coach door shutting,
Like a leader's wrapping to a ready orchestra;
The roll of wheels;
The castanets upon the pavement. . . .
She and her lover have fled. . . .
"What's the matter, Belle?"
Len is at my side, bending his head
To peer into my eyes,
Craning his neck to look down into the twilight,
Brooding darkly on the lawns
Of Empty Mansion.
"What do you see, Belle?"
"Oh, nothing; I was just a thinking
What they tell about that old house,
Why it is so empty now."

FOR ME

It is lilac time,
Down in the hedges of Empty Mansion,
Lilac time.

Standing at the far side of our front window,
I can look down into lilac time,
Purple and white:

Dim mists crowd into my eyes
Like the mists on Blue Mountain in lilac time
Up the River.

"There's our youngster and a policeman, Belle."
So it is;

High perched on the iron fence,
The boy is reaching over,
Straining to the nearest cluster,
Behind him a policeman coming,
Taking him by the coat and his trousers,
Lifting him gently down upon the sidewalk.
I wonder what he is saying to the boy. . . .
He shakes his head and gravely walks away,
His duty done in lilac time.

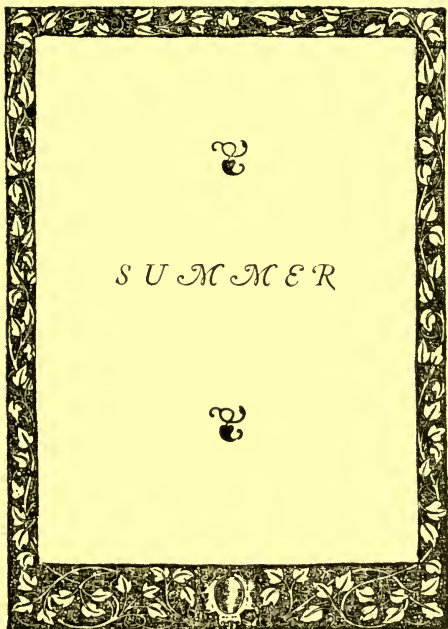
In lilac time?

The blue-coat pauses;

Sniffs the drunken air

Where the lilac struggles with the factory's breath;
Comes back and plucks a lilac spray,

Hands it to the boy and walks away,
Like in a distant dream,
His, maybe, of an Irish byeway
In the years behind him.
The small boy brings the lilac spray to me,
But never a word about the blue-coat,
And I do not ask him,
Nor let Len.
It is lilac time;
Only the hedges of Empty Mansion know it,
And only other empty things
The City cannot fill.



DIVORCE

"Well! I'd take the children, if we separated."

"How'd you support them?"

"I can scrub floors,

If I can't do anything else."

"Yes, and what would they be doing

While you scrubbed—

Runnin' the streets?"

"Better for them than being brought up

Like this—in a family quarreling all the time. . . ."

Len and me are at it again,

Like two caged animals;

One as bad as the other, I suppose,—

Maybe it would have been different,

If we'd stayed up the River—

Where they work so hard

Every living minute of the time.

There Len would have had his chores to do

After the day's work,

Instead of just coming home

With nothing to do

But see how I was running the house,

And finding fault,

When we are both so tired
We could go to sleep with our shoes on
Like the children after a hard day.
“He could do worse things than come home”;
He says, “Suppose he spent his hard-earned money
In a rum-hole, or having a good time
With the boys,
Like some men he could mention.”
Well, if it isn’t one thing it is another,
I suppose.
Just now it all started
By his reading in a newspaper
How a rich woman
Up and left her husband.
“She must be bad,” he said.
“Maybe she had cause,” I said.
And before we knew it,
Len and me was leaving each other,
Like two dogs tied to the same string.
“The children,” I said,
“Would go with me.”
“Ain’t for you to say.”
“They’re my children.”
“And Mine.”
“I did the sufferin’ for them.”
“Well, we’ll settle that.
We’ll ask them.

Son, come here!"

"Len, don't you dast;

Ain't you any sense of decency?

Asking them that question at their age?

Son, go back to your book;

We don't want you."

"Yes, I do."

"No, you don't—if you dast, Len;—

Go back. . . ."

But the boy stands there

Like a still brown pool in the woods,

Reflecting back every thing that's passing,

Making my heart feel like it was asleep.

"See what you've done, Len!

Son, go. . . ."

The boy looks slowly from Len to me;

"I wish," he says,

"You wouldn't fight so much."

"We're not fighting."

"No, only arguing," says Len;

"Do like your mother says."

Arguing?

Sometimes I wish I could make it true.

Only the children—

I don't know—

Children, like the humming of an empty shell

When you hold it up to your ear—

The children.

Maybe they'll be worth it all. . . .

Reading novels don't help—

Making you feel life's all

Kings and queens, ladies and knights,

Flashing bright and brittle, like china things

Through scarlet, and purple, and gold,

Till your heart feels bright and light,

So you come back lost and numb

When you close the book.

Believing in the Bible don't help,

Singing,—“From Greenland's icy mountains

To India's coral strands,”

And “Lead kindly light.”

I want something you can feel

Like it was human;

Like a lighted window

Along a lonely road at dusk,

The lamp shining pale orange thro' the lavender

And dusky green,

Even though you know

It ain't put there a purpose for you. . . .

Children.

FEELINGS

“Pahpuh, you goin’ to war?
I know a feller is, are yuh?”
“Would you want pahpuh to go to war
And leave you and mother all alone?”
“Aw, it won’t take Uncle Sam long
To lick a Spaniard—
Looka the kind of a flag he’s got,
Red and yellor,
Just stripes—that ain’t no flag:
Now the Red, White, and Blue,
With stars. . . .”
“Pahpuh might get killed.”
Len looks across the table at me,
To see how I take that:
I knew that would be next—
Like field-mice in the house
After frost comes—
His nibbling away at my feelings.
That’s why I get up
And begin to pile the supper dishes;
I ain’t showing nothing.
So Len turns back to the children:
“You wouldn’t want him to get killed,
—Would you?”
“N-no—but how’d you know you would be?”

"That's what they go to war for,
To kill or be killed."

The children are sober now,
And turn away,
With something else again to talk about—
Like Sawney and Peacha and old Mauney
On a rainy day in harvest time,
All over again.

Len gets the dish-towel
To help with the dishes.

I know it's coming:

"You know, Maw,—
It might come to draftin'."

"Yes."

"You don't seem to care much."

"I don't see what you mean, Len."

"I remember mah, up the River,
When pah was drafted

Back in sixty-three—four,

She took on something horribul.

You ought to know something about that:

Your father was drafted, too,

Wasn't he?"

"Yes, he was drafted."

"Well?"

"Now look here, Len, I know what you want.
You want me to make a fuss,

Begging you not to go,
About something that ain't here yet,
Maybe won't be,
And I ain't going to till I have to.
Land knows, I got enough in life
To get worked up about
Without digging a well in a swamp."
"You might at least take some interest."
"You can throw just so many stones
Into a pool to see it ripple,
But by and by it gets filled up
And there ain't no more ripples:—
I'm filled up."
Len goes back to his newspaper,
Looking for more stones, I guess,
To skip over the surface of his feelings.
The only time I see him get any good
Out of newspapers
Is when he stops getting them
After McKinley is shot
And the minister tears them up
In his pulpit,
He's so mad at them.
But it doesn't last long with Len;
In a little while
He's at them again,
Reading every night:

"Advice to Those in Love"—

Pity he don't ask me.

OUR PICTURES

"Enlarge in crayon, lady,

Any photograph you got—

Only fifty-cents.

We sell frames, too,

So you can have the picture complete;

Makes a lovely birthday surprise;

Have it hanging on your parlor wall

When your husband comes home.

That's you and him there, ain't it?"

He points to the two small pictures

Of me and Len when we was married, and young,

Hanging together in one frame.

So I take Len's out and give it to him.

It's only fifty-cents,

And I don't have to buy a frame

If I don't want to.

I take down the frame

That had our two pictures

So Len won't notice his picture gone.

Of course, he ain't an hour home
Before he notices our pictures off the wall.
I tell him I've got it down
To clean it;
I have the hardest time
Keeping him from cleaning it for me;
I guess he thinks I broke the glass
And don't want to tell him.
'Course, that ends in words—
Seems like everything goes to words,
Like fire to dust and ashes.
When the man comes back with his enlargement
He has it already framed.
"Five dollars!" he says.
"But I didn't order a frame;
And that one there,
Looks cheap and broken."
He seems surprised.
Lady? How could he afford to enlarge
If he didn't sell frames, too?
Well, he'll take it back.
'Where's my small photograph?'"
Oh, he's left that with the enlarger.
Looks like he has me.
What am I to do?
Len always liked that picture
Best of all he's ever had.

I dasent lose it,
And if I don't take the crayon,
Frame and all,
I'm like to lose it.
So I take it, and pay for it,
Out of the money I was saving up
For some dress goods.
Len isn't home yet—
But I put my apron over the crayon
And carry it upstairs.
I wish I hadn't let that man persuade me so:
The dreary feeling steeps slowly through me
Like freshet water
Slowly rising up over our creek lot
Round about the hay-cocks,
Up and up fascinatingly
Till it laps the meadow fence.
I'm half afraid when Len comes home,
And I show it to him.
He just looks at it. . . .
If I was a crying woman,
I'd cry.
Len wants to know if he ever
Had pink cheeks like that.
"I did it to please you, Len,
To please you. . . ."
"Now, Belle . . . !"

But he won't have his picture on the wall
Unless mine is there, too:
"Fine looking jack-ass I'd make,
Wouldn't I,
Having my picture up there alone
As if I was It!"
So there they are now,
Our two pictures side by side,
Our morgue,
Like everybody else's on the block.
Len spent too much money on them
To take them down.
They look too queer
For us to be proud of them.
'Spose I've got to live with them till I die.
Fine ornaments,
Our picture gallery!
Just like they have in English novels:
We're on the line.

I WONDER

No soft fingering shadows of Blue Mountain
To search me out,

And lie beside me in the night.
Only him; I wonder if he knows.
Beyond these walls that close around me,
The solemn tread of a restless city,
Clad in sulky velvet, glimmering with many sequins,
Sleep-walking in its dreams
Of hunger and many children.
I wonder if he dreams it ever
While I lie awake
Longing for another's touch.
Yesterday I saw again the other man,
So clean and dressed up,
His collar and cuffs so white,
As if it was always Sunday—
"The little chap's all right again," he said,
"But you'd better keep him on his tonic for a while."
Before he left, he looked me in the eyes,
And looked away.
I wonder if Len dreams
As he lies sleeping by my side;
I wonder what he would do;
I shall not tell him;
He wouldn't understand.
Like he didn't
The other morning in the graying light,
When I laughed
Because he stood in the open door upon the street,

His little rifle in his hand
He used to hunt with in the woods at home,
And never a stitch on him but his vest
To carry the bullets in,
To shoot the cats
That had screamed his early morning sleep away.

HER CLASS

So that is done.
Oh, she has been cordial enough;
Called me Belle, and laughed,
The old laugh, muffled by her loose-hung lips;
But I don't belong any more;
Not to her set.
I wonder if my eyes
Are like the vacant seeming
Eyes across the street-car aisle;
One row that faces another row,
Waiting with pursed impatience
For something to be ended,
A something like a soundless hyphen
Between the beginning and the end;
Eyes that faintly glitter back

The lights and shadows of houses
As they flash by so staringly.
I ain't in her class any more;
"Come again," she said;
But she knew I wouldn't come.
The hum and whimper of the motor;
The faint metallic odor that bites the teeth;
The whip and thrash of the trolley overhead.
She has moved away,
To a better neighborhood.
Down the side-streets as we go whirring past
Are trees with purple shadows on the asphalt,
Blue-green arms of comfort interlaced
To take the hardness out of streets.
Her jokes are not the same;
I didn't get the cue to laugh
Like I used to when I knew
Her thought behind the word;
So it is ended.
To will that thought away
I can close my eyes and nod as if asleep
Like the man across the aisle
Twitching stealthily under the silent patter
Of a fly's feet upon his nose
Because he doesn't want to give that woman his seat.
But it is there:
The weary patter of the thought—

I ain't in her class any more.
She is earning good money for herself
And doesn't have to live where I do.
Grumbling at every wheel that pounds,
The car stops at a cobbled street—
Down its gray-baked corridor
Not a tree of human mercy
In the sun.
“The next corner, please.”
Oh, I knew it when she moved away,
But I had to go and see.

OUR FLAG

They're going to put the flag out now,
Onto the little pole
That sticks up from our front-room window.
Len, with the children gathered round him,
He wants me to come too, and see him
“Put out Old Glory,” as he calls it.
But I can hear them, that's enough;
I've got my work to do.
And every Fourth of July, and every holiday,
Len goes through the same performance.

"Wouldn't hurt you none to come," says Len;

"Nothing can be too important

When Old Glory goes up."

"Well all right, but before I'd be so sentimental. . . ."

I come, drying my hands on my apron.

You'd think it was a loving thing

The way Len handles the flag,

With that queer little laugh in his throat;

The way it slides out

Over the window-sill,

Quivers when the wind catches it,

Leaps out

Into the golden sun,

The red and white swelling

And flowing mysteriously

To the field of stars, and away again. . . .

"Ain't that great, Maw!"

"The younger children hurry away:

"Fortch-u-lie" is popping

Down in every street.

They go, all but that oldest one of mine:

He turns back to a book.

Now, I don't like that, so I speak to him.

"Say, you, where's your fire-crackers?"

"Didn't get um."

"Thought you was saving up so you could."

Well, he was;
But then he thought he'd save the money
For something else, didn't know just what.
Now I can't have him get to be
Like his father, so close with money:—
“Oh, you was?
Now look here:
It ain't good to be a miser;
And don't you be so saving
You can't be patriotic.
What would your father say?”
So he lays the book aside.
Not that I think his father sometimes
Is so very patriotic either,
The way he goes on to me
About the things he's been reading:
How this man bought his way to Congress,
And that man in the lobby changed his vote,
Or this big corporation made a judge,
Or that big union went too far.
If Len didn't talk so wild about these things,
You could feel for him more
When you see him there
With that hurt look in his eyes,
Brooding over his crumpled newspaper
Like old Maunie up the River,
After all his working and waiting,

Sitting on his back lot fence
Looking out over his planting
That the blight had struck
And ruined.

It makes my heart ache,
Those holiday mornings
After Len's been reading something wrong,
To see him with the children
Putting the flag out,
Pretending to give that queer little laugh
So the children will think it is the same
As always, in the morning,
When, "Old Glory" flies.

NO PLACE

"We must take the children out of this, Len;
Did you see the yellow smoke
All yesterday and to-day;
It came right into the house.
I couldn't keep it out no matter how I tried."
"Whither thou goest, I would go,"
He quotes at me.
"I know, Len, but I ain't the children."

"I s'pose it would be best;
The old folks up the River
Would be glad to see you,
And the children."

"It's only for August, Len;
They ain't their right growth
For children their age."

"I guess you're right;
Seems like the City's all right for us,
But not for them."

He looks across at the red sun
Setting over the roofs of Hell's Kitchen;
You can almost smell the tar
Melting on the roofs under the white pebbles.
"It ain't no place."

JIM

"Hello, Belle."

"Eh! You, Jim?"

I don't know what makes it so still

All about us:

Golden rod rounding up over the hill,
Cold and hard;

Across the road one branch of sugar maple
Awing us with its cardinal red and green,
Blue Mountain breathing silently, distantly,
Against a sky of creamy satin
Like the head of a tired lover on your breast.
"Yes, me, Belle."

He pulls up his team slowly,—
"Guess we ain't seen each other
For a long time," he says wistful—
"Not since you—"

He stops. . . .

I don't know: does he want to stop like that?
Or does he really feel like that?
I can't tell.

He's grown so plump and easy looking,
Driving team for Blue Mountain Boarding House.
I finish the sentence for him,
A queer move in my heart
Like bread rising too quick!
"Since I went down the River."

He looks up the road,
Flicks his whip at a fly on the horse's flank—
"How do you like it? . . .
Livin' down to the City?"
"Oh, I don't know."

"You was always crazy about the City."
"You get used to it," I answer.

"You wouldn't a had to if you'd a took me."

"Yes, I know."

"I'd a made you happier, Belle,—
Than him."

"I didn't say I wasn't happy."

"But are you happy?"

You should 'a took me—and you know it!"

"I don't, seeing what I hear about you, Jim."

"Whose fault is that?"

"You can't put your drinkin' on me."

"A man's got nothin' else, now you're gone—
Belle, ain't you never sorry?"

It ain't too late for us yet, Belle. . . ."

Jim's nigh horse jerks

So the lines fall from his hands;

A small boy has darted under the horse's nose

And stands there now,

Trying to make us out.

"You go back to the house, young fellow,

Next thing the horse will bite you!"

"Who's that, Mahmuh?"

"Did you hear me!"

He goes.

"One of his brats, I suppose."

"One of my children."

"It's all the same—

They're not mine."

"What's come over you, Jim?

Why don't you find a nice girl and marry—
there's—"

"Yes, I know, but she ain't you."

He drives moodily away;

I can't seem to hold him like I used to—

But what can I expect?

The creamy satin over Blue Mountain

Changes to rose, and palest green and yellow

Pours across the valley's blue and bronze

Till the apple-tree I pass under

Mirrors on its fruit

A red and apple-green and lemon-yellow

Round and sweet amid its bronzy green. . . .

How Jim's changed.

Brat?

WAITING FOR US

"Good-by, boys, don't forget your granpar;

And you, Peacha, next time you come

To help your grandad farm,

I'll have some nose-tickle for you."

"Aw g'wan with your ole horse-radish."

Father turns his horses from the steam-boat
dock;

Drives slowly away, up the narrow hill street,

Up into the golden sun

Fluttering down behind Blue Mountain,

Softly withdrawing its fingers from my heart.

Wistful-eyed the boys watch the village fade

Beside the whispering river;

They are remembering again old Harry-dog

Crying after them as we came away.

I wish I had remembered to weigh them when we
came;

I always tell Len they only grow

In the summer, up the River.

There's the boat's white wake trailing after us,

So you could make lace curtains of it;

Only they wouldn't stay white

In the City.

Blue Mountain fades away

Like a sigh in the night.

Len will be waiting for us in the morning.

OLDER NOW

They don't give way like they used to,
These men in the crowds I meet;
No, and once on a time they did;
But my skin wasn't yellowed then,
Faintly like the roses of Pat McBride
He gave to Hattie Kroesen
The night she gave a party,
The crystal anniversary
Of her mother in a boarding-house,
When she whispered a word in his ear
And he went out like a prince and came back
With what he said were tea roses
And she was mad
Because she wanted American Beauties
Like the flaunted roses of Mary Finn.
I said she was lucky
To have a man to give her roses.
She laughed as she answered me:
"You're too good to be true, Belle."
No, they don't give way
Like they used to
When I walked the streets of the city
Or went to the beach with Len
On a Sunday Afternoon,

So crowded you wished you hadn't come.
Once they would look while a smile
Haunted their silent eyes,
As they paused to let me pass.
I must be getting old,
And faded a little.

HIS RELIGION

"Len, I won't have it:
You talking like that in front of the boys—
Did you see him,
Staring with saucer eyes,
Sponging in every word you said?"
"Well—it's the truth."
"It ain't the truth for them so young:
You're only talking, but they think it's living;
You can stay home from church if you want to;
But it's all I got to meet people;
I left my mother's church
I always went to
When the bells called
Across the meadow and the creek,
Like birds flying through the twilight
One by one

Up to the Highwoods under Blue Mountain;
I left it and all the friends I had,
And Dominie Cother and all;
Joined the kind of church
Your people go to,
Hoping you would go to church with me
Like you used to up the River;
Hoping—and it didn't make no difference,
No more than a new dress
I spent hours making to please you;
But that's me;
The children's different;
Sometime God will put a hant on you
Talking like that,
Don't you know it?"
That shames him like it might;
He haunches lower in his chair;
I didn't think he was so tanned
Till I see him blush,
But it blots out on his cheek-bones
Under his eyes where the tan ain't so thick.
But another day, and he starts to talk again,
All because he reads in his Sunday paper
How a rich man gives a lot of money to the church
And then on something we all needed
Raised the price half a cent.
"Len!

And you, young saucer eyes,
Don't you hear the other fellars
Calling for you to come out and play?"
At the door the boy turns,
With weighty argument upon his face:
"But paw, only to-day
Teacher made hell on the black-board;
Drew it with chalk down in one corner;
With heaven up in the other;
With the whole earth and everything between;
Won't he go there?"
"I guess so; run along."
When he is gone, I face Len,
My heart beating like it will sometimes.
"Len, I want to make a bargain with you:
If you'll stop talking like that
Till they're grown up and fit to think
For themselves;
The boys mustn't grow up heathen;
They must be given their chance to God
Like you had, up the River;
That's why I go to church;
Send them to Sunday-school.
If you'll stop talking,
I promise when the time comes
I'll never set foot in church again,
Nor mention church again,

Give up the friends I'm making there.

Will you, Len, will you?"

He sees I mean it.

"All right, Belle, I guess you're right."

I'll say this much for him:

He's keeping his word.

BEFORE

There!

I know it, I know it!

I did that very same thing before—

In some preëxistence.

While I am talking to her,

The feeling comes on me,

Like a hail-storm in August.

All I am doing and saying

I did in some other life

Before this one here:

She stood there talking just so and so;

I stood here listening,

Watching the way her nose moved

Like a rabbit's eating lettuce;

Thinking how Len said,

She was a darn sweet girl;
And I said, "Yes—
If she wasn't so religious;
Pity she ain't married
To have some of it knocked out of her."
Yes, while I am talking to her,
The boys' Sunday-school teacher,
The feeling comes on me
Right where I stand;
I done this before in some other life.
I feel as unreal as a sudden October twilight.
When you stand in the quiet woods
Between two hills
With bronze light dropping
And spreading like a stain
From the cloud dark
Down over Blue Mountain
With Autumn's trees so unearthly still,
Yet making you hear
Our big church organ
Crumbling into thunder.
You know? It's funny,
But I often have these spells.
I sometimes think I'm witched,
And maybe I am—
Take the time that oldest boy of mine
Was up the River

And I was down here,
And he got hurt so bad.
Something made me restless all day long;
At night I couldn't sleep
Without haunted dreams;
Then the letter came,
And I knew what had been troubling me.
Things like that have happened so often
That now I take it natural
When I feel I'm remembering
Out of another life I've lived.
Only I wonder, was I a poor man's wife,
Like I am now;
Or did I do something wrong then
So what I am now is my punishment?
"Land's sakes!" as Sary Ann used to say,
I must a been awful wicked
If it is.
Well, I hope I was,
So I can get some good out of it
To pay for this life.
I wonder what it was I did
When I was a woman before?

ELEVEN O'CLOCK

"Hump! About time!
'Leven o'clock at night!
Nice hour for a married woman to be out—
Alone!"

Len looks at me side-ways,
Like a fish in a glass bowl
To see what I'll do when he says, "Alone."
I catch him out of the corner of my eyes
And I don't answer,
Just go on undressing
Like I don't hear him,
Sending my mind picking flowers
In the lane back of the school-house
Up the River.

But I can't long, for soon I'm thinking:
That must have been Len then;
I thought I saw the window curtain move
When we reached the corner;
He must have been watching for me,
Fuming like a tea-kettle on the boil.
When I came in
He was winding the clock, too;
Must have waited to do that
Till he heard me on the last stairs
So he could have an excuse to talk

About the time when I came in the door.

It's like him to do that—

Wind the clock on Wednesday night

When he does it reg'lar every Saturday night,

Reg'lar as a stem-winder himself.

"Have a good time?" he asks.

"Yes, Ladies Aid Meeting,

Like I told you."

"How long's he been a member?"

"Who?"

"The man who came with you far as the corner

And then turned back?"

"The man?"

I thought you said I was alone."

"Oh, I saw him even if he thinks different."

"Len! you know who he was

Well as I do."

"Was he afraid to come to the house?"

"No! he was seeing me home,

It was late and I told him

He'd come far enough."

"To the corner—humph!"

"That's where the dark ended."

"And the light began so's he could be seen."

"Have it your own way,

Like a hatchin' hen.

I'd be glad and you know it,

To have you call for me

Like he did for his sister;

We come along together;

These streets ain't no fit place

For a woman alone at night;

Tillie sent him on with me."

"Didn't need to be coaxed much, I bet."

"That's more than could be said for you."

"How could I be out half the night?

I got to be at work half-past six;

I ain't got nothin' to do like him;

Easy for him with no family to support."

"Spying on your wife through a curtain,

I'd be ashamed of myself if I was you."

"I wasn't spying, I was looking for you."

Len puts out the light

And we go to bed. . . .

I wish I knew if he is really jealous,

Or just small.

I sometimes think—

Len gives a soft snore in the blackness,

And mutters. . . . "Afraid to come. . . ."

Oh! what I couldn't do to that man sometimes. . . .

Blue Mountain woods all afire,

And me fighting it in the horrid night,

Panting through lips that crack

And trickle red;
The tiger flames,
Hunting me, hunting me down,
Ringing me round,
Snarling, licking,
Repulsively—
That's how I feel. . . .
A trolley car comes purring up the street,
Sings shrill, jolts, and purrs away;
Strange how comforting it is,
And sort of human,
Coming out of the city dark to me;
Away again;
Silence;
Like a shooting star.
Right here can't be everything that matters.
The clock on the mantle is ticking steadily;
That's sweet and comforting, too, somehow.
From the next room,
A queer little meaningless whisper—
That small boy must be talking
In his sleep again.
I can sleep now.

A STREAK OF LUCK

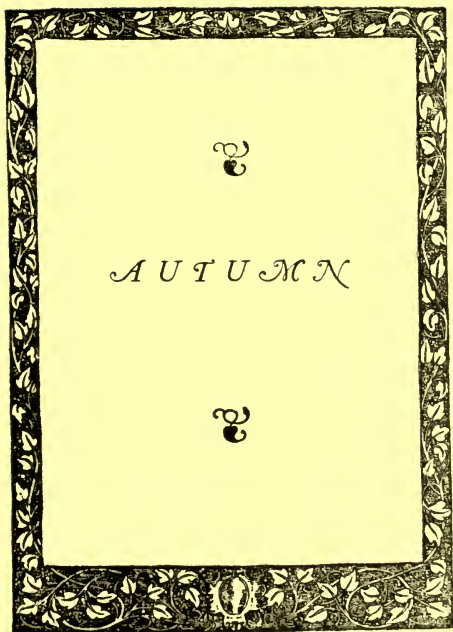
"You wonderful creature,
And in these surroundings!"
He is looking at me,
His wide gray eyes
Kinda crazy like,
Staring so like a mouse
You've caught in a trap.
When you pass him in the streets
His eyes are like that, too;
They make you take his words different
Than if another man said them.
Then too, besides being our new preacher,
He is a poet.
At the Odds and Ends booth
At our last Church Fair
I bought a book of poems
That had his name in it.
"In this environment—," he says,
"I can't understand it."
When he is gone I watch him up the street
Striding across the puddles,
A queer figure the boys laugh at,
With the long tails of his coat and cape
Flapping in the wind behind him.
The houses stand back from him,

Eyeing him meanly,
Like worn-out enemy soldiers,
And him a foreign messenger
Going back to his king
With an unaccepted offer of truce.
In a little while Len comes home;
Something seems to be in my fingers;
First I break the handle off the pitcher
I've had ever since I married;
Then I drop to pieces the cover
Of my brand new butter-dish.
Len looks up:
"What's come into you, Maw?"
"I don't rightly know what it is,
But that's two things I broke.
Hope it ain't true what they say,—
Got to break three things
Before your streak of luck changes—
If it is, I better hurry
And break something useless right off."
While I am cutting the bread,
I stop and listen,
The third thing—
Could it be—be—environment?

ONCE

You can't do what you want to do;
I know, for I have tried some.
And it's always, "Nix so you can notice it,"
As the woman says next door.
Take the time when I was first married:
I bought a pencil and pad,
Thinking I would draw a little,
Copying things I liked
Till I could do it alone.
Then I tried to write some poetry,
And I did a little now and then,
When I got time.
Then Len said he'd get me a piano
When I learned to play,
For it was something I always hankered after,
Like flying up and meeting the birds
When they fly north in the Spring.
I took two lessons
From the girl who lived downstairs;
Then I stopped;
My last baby was coming,
So I couldn't very well,
And besides Len read somewhere
How the Greeks were all so beautiful
Because the mothers had before them

All the time
Beautiful statues and things to look at.
He talked so much about it
I sent off my soap coupons
I was saving up for a rug,
For two big pictures they were giving away.
But they didn't do me no good;
My baby when it came
Didn't have the big blue eyes,
Nor the golden hair like the little girl
Dressed up for little Lord Fauntleroy,
Nor a nice cupid's mouth
Like the one playing with a kitten,
In the shiny colored pictures.
But I had hung them up on the parlor doors
And looked at them faithful
Like Len wanted me to
Every afternoon,
Sometimes till it was so late
The factories would be letting out
And the tired men and boys, so yellow-faced,
Would be swirling down the street
Like crumpled dried-up leaves,
That wasn't doing what they wanted to
Either.



ALL ABOUT US

Len says it is getting worse each year,
The way the Ghetto grows
Close and closer to our street;
Soon it will swallow us
And pass on,
Unsatisfied as the mind of man.
Not that I can see any difference
Whether it be German or Irish or Italian
Or a lost tribe of some other people
That swallows us up
And passes on.
To me it is more like Fate
Than anything else I can think of,
Like I read the other day:
"The priest that slew the slayer
And shall himself be slain."
Len should talk;
He has a collection of arrow-heads
He found when he was a boy
Up the River,
Plowing where another race had hunted
And passed on.

I guess as long as there are mothers
Beyond the empty stretches of the world
Farewells and weeping will be there,
And here Ghettos and Hell's Kitchens,
Dutchtowns and Dumptowns.
Between the farewell and these messy places
Will be a long journey of people,
Hazy-eyed, looking beyond the emptiness
To a land of promise.
First the arrow-maker
Who was himself not first;
Then Len's people and mine;
Now the Ghetto
That shall swallow us
And pass on.
Just Fate—
I felt it this morning;
Fate, brooding like a prodigal giant
In a far city of husks and bread
As I steppped from a thoroughfare, people-black,
Where the noise shuttled and flashed
To please the ear of a graven God
Who smiled a polished smile,
Into a side-street,
Down between the narrow walls
Into a city of silence that prayed,
Into the Ghetto,

Into a city empty
As the Sabbath of God
In the quiet morning that shall come after
The crashing day of Judgment.
So still the streets,
My heart poised and waited to beat on.
Every vacant store, so bleary-eyed,
Had become a Holy of Holies.

CHESTNUT TIME IS HERE

Fall is in the City:
The streets are wind-swept corridors,
Draughty halls of meeting and passing
In the high noon's genial sun—
Dried-up runnels at dark,
Now the pageantry of a summer's night
Has passed behind the doors
Of houses that sullenly stand
As if they had turned their backs to think,
But forgetfully by every lighted window
Are mumbling to themselves. . . .
Through the memory of Fall
Up the River:—

Purple and gold upon the hills,
Scarlet and ocher in the wood,
Silvery wisteria smoke above the creeks—
The City Park is calling us,
In stage costume and autumnal mask
Of make-believe.
The trees behind the walls,
The feel of the rustle of leaves about the feet,
Their seething resistance as we pass—
Are calling Len and me;
To the children it only means
Going chestnutting,
Or something.
For it is chestnut time:
Just yesterday we got a salt-bagful
From the Old Folks
Up the River.
So we pass the gates of the Park
With glad release in the heart;
Trail out under the trees:
A score or so of them,
A thousand or so of us,
A chestnut or so and a worm.
Len and the children scatter zestfully;
Sharply their laughter
Breaks through the russet air—
When they make a find.

Strange, too, how lucky they are,
More than the others, or me.
What's the matter with me,
They want to know;
Why can't I find some, too;
There's lots of them if I knew how to look.
So, like a mother hen,
I hurry and find one soon.
When the russet of the open
Has turned to rust upon the houses of our street
We come home again,
Boastful, rather, of our findings; proud.
Not so many I should say,
Only a handful or two.
Sorry they are for poor mother,
Because she found so few.
Oh, these men and their sons!
Poor mother!
"Good! we got a bagful safe at home,
Else mother'd fare pretty slim
On chestnuts, eh?
It takes the boys every time!"
Len gets the salt-bag;
Stops and holds it up
Before his weighing eye:
"I could have sworn
This bag was fuller than that."

"It was," I tell him;
"Where do you suppose
Those chestnuts came from
You found in the Park to-day?
Suppose you didn't notice me
Walking in front of you
Dropping chestnuts
So you and the boys could find them?"

CHRISTMAS

I guess that small boy of mine
Has walked ten miles to-day
Going from window to window,
Slowly, longingly,
His eyes winking so the fire snaps from them,
Looking at Christmas things in the stores.
"And, oh, mahmuh, I ought to see. . . ."
There is a strange exultation in his face,
The little pulse in his throat beats
So you can almost hear it.
Don't I know how he feels—
I go window-shopping too,
Till I feel that haunted feeling

Like I was a spirit humming-bird
Hovering over a strange garden
Of many flowers that tremble and wait.
"I ought to see. . . ."
I do see: toys and toys
His Santa Claus won't bring him
Because he can't afford to.
"And oh, mahmuh, do you suppose
Santa Claus will bring me one as big as . . ."
"Why—why, maybe, if you're a good boy."
A good boy? And me an honest woman—
How I hate myself for saying that.
Only last night I was counting up
My skimpings from my housekeeping money—
Not near enough. . . .
And Christmas morning
I hear them like little mice
Rustling and squirming
Till I say it's warm enough to get up.
Then the rush, the shout;
And me almost afraid to go with them,
Because I made every cent go as far as I could,
But money goes only just so far,
Not as far as any wistful hope.
With a crackling fire of glee
They swoop down upon their things.
He's got it.

A momentary quiver of the lip,
To see how small it is,
Measured by his desires;
He looks up at me;
The quiver dies whitely;
His little shoulders go back.
He turns with a funny taut movement
And begins to thump his drum
With a wilful joy.
“Listen, to it, mahmuh, listen.”
I listen,
Every thump a strange echo in my heart.
So that’s all right
Between him and me,
But in the afternoon
I catch him with a frown of thought
Upon his small white forehead,
His eyes centered distantly upon a chimney
Black above a crouching factory,
Centered there as if a spell was on him.
“What is it—?”
Oh, he was only wondering—
“There’s the same Santa Claus
For everybody, isn’t there?”
He and Fritzzy Pfeiffer,
Both had asked him for a big one;
Fritzzy got it

And he didn't.

"Course it's all right—"

With a grave assuring look at me—

"But if Santa Claus. . . ."

I can't explain to him—not yet.

He didn't see Len's shrug,

Nor his sour smile,

When he opened up his cotton shirt

Santa Claus had brought him,

Saying half to himself:

"Yes, Santa Claus brought it,

But where'd he get the money?"

The small boy overheard him.

"What, pahpuh?"

"Len!"

"Santa Claus is a great old feller,"

Amended Len.

LONGIES

My oldest boy wants to keep on at school,

For all his hating it so;

That city-red box of brick upon brick,

Fitting his little soul like winter flannels,

Homey as the red sand-pit's nakedness
The railroad dug when it came our way
With its wistful far echoes among our hills
Under Blue Mountain.

But my next oldest boy, he wants to go to work,
Wants to wear longies like the other boys
With a job.

"Yuh gotta have long pants,
Or they won't let yer work, yer know.
Yuh can go to night school;
Have lots of fun there;
Don't scold yer or nothin';
Just as if yer were playing school."
He hates the day teacher.

"What's her name?" asks Len.

"Aw, Miss Euse, the old stiff."

"Oh, Miss Use!" says Len, "no wonder!"

Len's face is carved out of seriousness,
Like a child's face when he whispers: "Ghosts";

"What can you expect," he says,

"From a person with a name like that?

Use—no Use—there's something about a name—
Eh, what's the matter, Belle?"

"Nothing, just choking—the water I was drinking
Went down the wrong way, I guess."

"Well, it's right about names that way;

Notice for yourself if it isn't."

"Well, then, I can go to work?"

Len looks at me with level eyes:

"What do you think, Belle," he asks;—

"The money would help some. . . ."

"Aw, would I have to give my pay to you?"

"No, to your mother."

Rebellion is in the boy's shoulder

That shrugs like a hammer against the thought.

"She brought you up, didn't she?"

The boy went back to school;

I saw him go,

The north wind in his bleak blue eyes;

He might have been carrying books,

Or moldy bread to Holy Communion,

For all they were to him.

I looked down at the tricycle on the floor

He had taken apart so intently

To turn it into what he called his bike,

A proud thing of his own making.

The ache ebbed from my heart,

Till it glinted in my eyes;

I saw him up the River,

As he might have been,

Doing the things he wanted to do.

KITCHENS

Funny little kitchens now-a-days;
All the hominess has moved out of them;
Of course it makes it easier for you
To get your work done,
But it does seem like every time
You get things easier
You lose something else,
Till life gets like a million paper boxes
All of them labeled:
"Made without the touch of a human hand!"
Take our old kitchen up the River—
That's where we lived.
Of course we had a best room,
But we didn't use it much
Except for special company
You weren't quite at home with;
But the kitchen,
With its long beams overhead,
Ceiling so low a tall man could touch it,
Walls gathering round you
Like your children at Thanksgiving Time,
And them singing "The Old Folks at Home,"
And "Way Down on the Swanee River,"
And "The Battle Hymn of the Republic,"
And you just feeling warm and happy.

And then our old kitchen fire-place
Taking up a third of the long south wall;
Old Mauny would tell how his sister Sait
Used to bake slap-jacks there,
On her long-handled skillet,
Slinging it over the fire;
And when the time came to turn the pan-cake
She'd give a twist so it
Would fly up the chimney,
Turn over, and come right side down
Upon the skillet again.
He said if you was outside
You could see the cake
Come out of the chimney,
Turn over and go down.
"And good!"—he used to run around the house
So he could eat some more.
Of course even in my day,
Pah had to get a stove
And board the chimney up,
But that didn't change the spirit none!
Old Mauny and the neighbors would drop in
And sit and cod you with their stories
Just like they used to.
I'd like to see them
Sit round my gas stove,
Or stretch out and yarn

In any other part of the house,
For that matter.
I think they would feel kind of half naked.

THE MORTGAGE

"Yes, you're my son,
But you're just like your father,
And I was bringing you up to be different
All these years."
Fiercely I speak to keep from more tears.
"It was disappointment,
Seeing you like your father, just now.
Not what you said so much
As the way you said it. . . ."
If I could cry more often
I'd be better off
Than keeping it all inside me,
Working like a jar of spoiled preserves.
It was a small thing started it:
They were saying at supper
What they would do if they could wish
And get a thousand dollars, or more.
I said I knew what I would do,

But I wouldn't tell.
Then they began,
Guessing first, and then demanding,
And finally reproaching me
For having a secret away from them :
"A woman if she was good wouldn't do that."
Both of them like two little dogs
Yelping at you down the road.
After a while Len stopped ;
He saw the boy would do all the talking necessary,
And he didn't need to keep it up ;
Maybe he knew when to stop, too,
By just looking at me.
But that oldest boy—he went on :
How could I expect them to trust in me
If I wouldn't trust in them. . . .
By and by I couldn't help it,
I had to get up from the table
And go into the front room alone
In the dark where I could cry.
Of course then I told them :
It was only how I would pay
Off the mortgage on the old farm
Up the River
So it wouldn't be hanging like a stone
Over pah and mah,
Living there alone and growing old.

Len says that ain't sense ;
Business couldn't run
Without mortgages and borrowing money :
All rich men do it
Without feeling ashamed ;
And besides the old farm
Is mortgaged more than it's worth now,
And the best way to spite the people
For charging so high interest,
Is not to pay the thing at all
And let them try to get their money back.
But it don't make me feel right ;
And now him, after all my trying
To bring him up different,
Talking like that. . . .
I wish I hadn't wished.

THE ARGUMENT

"Take the miners," says Len,
Almost shouting to that oldest boy,
Who is standing up to him in an argument,
Word for word :
Len said he knew all about Labor ;

The boy, Len said, only read about Capital.

"Yes, take the miners," says Len;

"Our hull civ'lization's

Standin' on their backs,

And they know it,

Way down there in the dark

Where they die one way and another,

Like flies, you might say;

The only way they have to get in touch

With the rest of us

And get some of the excitement

We're livin' in

Is to strike.

Then we notice them—"

"But what right have they," asks the boy,

"To tie up the whole nation—just because—"

Then I jump into them with a broom,

Of course so as not to hurt them,

Like they was romping kittens

Trying their claws out

In my work-basket—

"Now get to bed, both of you;

I won't have it any longer," I tell them;

"Standing up on your hind-legs

In your night-shirts,

Talking at each other.

For years I've had it from your father,

And now you're beginning;
Get to bed."

But it does my heart good
To hear him stand up to his father
With that young ring in his voice,
Like a young rooster's.
They both laugh gleefully and go,
Promising each other to try it again
Some other time.

By the way Len winds the alarm-clock
You can see he, too, is pleased
At the way the boy stood up to him.
And they have it out again
When the street-car men go on strike:
The boy will ride on cars run by the scabs—
He can't see why a few men should be allowed
To tie up a whole cityful.
"You can't see?" says Len;
Climbing up on to an imaginary cart-tail,
In his eyes the far-off gleam
That must have been in the eyes
Of his ancestors, up the River,
Who built the old log church
Before ever a home was complete
Against the snow
Swishing down like iron whips
From Blue Mountain.

"Where'd we be if it wasn't for strikes?"

I'd be getting two dollars a day yet;

Ask your mother what two dollars a day meant.

Do you think you'd be getting to high-school

If it wasn't for them—

Not so's you could notice it.

'Spose they do go too far;

Who went there first?"

Then I break in and have my say:

"But why do men always and always

Have to fight for what they ought to have,

And be fought, to give others

What they should have?

Why don't you men ever learn?"

"And be fought?" asks Len.

"You know what I mean," I says

"Here I been working all my life

Like a servant-girl,

And what can I show for it?"

"Us, Belle, your home and children. . . ."

"You know what I mean:

Other things—money."

Len is silent; the boy

Looks slyly at him and grins.

"You ain't any better than him," I warn him;

"You keep off them cars, young man,

If you know what's good for you."

TWO WORLDS

Talk, talk, talk.

Just like the chopping little waves

On the big dam up the River

When the wind rubs it the wrong way

Up its back.

That's all that Len and his friends

Can do,

Dammed back by their jobs

That won't let them loose

Like they want to be.

So they talk wilder and wilder,

And the things they talk about,

Just because they are talk

Get worse and worse, by leaps and bounds,

Like a squall.

Till you'd think something would break.

And all the while the things themselves

Go on getting better,

Little by little.

But Len and his friends can't see that—

They're talking so wild,

With the wind blowing through their whiskers

And the spray of the waves of words they fling

In their eyes.

It's just like two worlds

We're living in :

The one that man is trying to make with words ;

The other that God made long ago,

Out of rocks and growing things and men,

That he's only praying over now.

But I wish the Bible would say

When next Monday was coming again

So God and man could buckle down together,

Else I suppose it'll happen once more,

Like it did in the book I was reading,—

"The Tale of Two Cities," by Dickens ;

When men like Len went off the handle ;

And the two worlds came together so hard

You'd think the Angel Gabriel

Had blowed his trumpet

For another Johnstown flood.

Not that I think that Len's so wrong

In most the things he says

That ain't run right ;

But just the same

I don't know as I'd be so tickled

To live in a world run the way

Len would run it, either.

I'm just as crazy as any rich woman is

For furs and dresses and nice things,

Only I can't get to have them as she does.

But Len doesn't seem to think they count

For so much.

And I see myself, too,

Like the old woman in the book,

Knitting and counting heads

As they come off.

Maybe I'd look the part,

Me getting old and fat,

But I see myself sitting there

Thinking I was getting what I wanted

Out of it.

Not much.

Like the old woman says,

"Twenty-three for that."

Though it's funny her using

Our slang like that

So long ago.

NOW

I tell Len we're slavin' and savin' money now

So his next wife,

Who'll be young,

Can spend it for him.

That's the way it will be,
For he's worked so hard
And saved so long
No woman would have him now
Except for his money.
Not that I can blame him for what he is;
If things had been different
He'd be different now.
He wasn't like this when he was young:
Before the City
Really had time to work the road
It meant for him to go.
But leaving me like this,
Wanting to take some by-path
Through the fields and woods
Where you feel free
To make believe you're somebody else
With no one to see you and say
You're putting on airs.
Like it is, I'm just seeing the ghosts of things
Like you do on a winter's afternoon
When you know the spring is coming,
But a softer north wind is rustling
Across the still white fields
With a soft fluttering of drifting snow.
Len says he'd never marry again,

But I ain't lived with him
All these years for nothing—
I know him.

THE FIRST PRIZE

“Now what do you think of that?
As the woman says next door.
I went to a euchre party,
And now look at me:
I won the first prize—
Me, with my own fair hands
That I scrubbed so hard
So I wouldn't be ashamed of them—
A cut-glass pickle-dish.
Len says, “You know what makes it so heavy?
It's made of lead, mostly;
Funny, how you can take lead and sand,
And make something that sparkles
Like that.”
“I should worry,” I tell him,
“What's it made of;
Long as it sparkles,
And they called my name out,

And Len gave a shrill cackle
In his throat,
And the people clapped and called
While I went up and got it,
With the seashore, it sounded like,
Tumbling in my ears,
And me feeling like there wasn't any top
To my head,
Though I knew I had my best switch of hair
On it;
My heart was sparkling, too,
Inside;
And I know what's that made of, I guess. . . .”
Or I ought to—
After having Len teach me how to play;
Being mad because I wasn't quick
To learn, and all that;
So I most wanted
To throw them down
And never see a card again.
But I said I was going to learn,
And I did—
There's the pickle-dish now,
Settin' on my side-board
To sparkle in the gas-light
When people come in,
And Len says what his wife done,

And shows it to them. . . .
I didn't use to play cards:
Mah was a Methodist,
And Pah just didn't
Like the rest of our folks
Up the River.
So I had never learned,
Didn't even want to learn,
But Len, he always liked to—
Which was all right
So long as he stayed at home
And only played
When somebody come to see us,
With nothing else to entertain them
For an evening.
But there was a time
When he began to go out every night,
Alone,
Because I couldn't play.
It was a public euchre,
He saw in our little neighborhood paper—
The first night he just kind of went to it
To see what it would be like,
Like a small boy going to his first party
At his Sunday School teacher's,
Doubtful, and winking his eyes
With the hard thinking that was getting him ready,

And out the door at last.
When Len come home that night
There was a sparkle in his eyes,
A little twitching smile under his mustache
That ain't there often. . . .
"Have a good time?"
Yes, he had, and I
Should have seen his partner play;
She knew a good player, too,
When she saw one;
Said she wished she could always have him
For a partner—
She'd win every time, then.
"Was she young?"
He saw me looking at him,
And didn't answer. . . .
When the next night come,
He didn't just get ready and go,
He went,
Like you see a pot boil over.
I asked him why he didn't take me—
And he lost his breath for a moment—
But of course, I couldn't play.
When he come home that night,
I didn't ask him anything,
And he didn't say;
But he was so excited

He talked in his sleep.

"She must be very pretty," I said

Next time he was dressing up to go.

He only blushed.

We didn't look at each other either:

Him going right on dressing,

And me washing the supper dishes

So he wouldn't see the red

Reflected back in my face,

Like you do when you look at a sunset—

Well, I couldn't play, could I?

Though I was dully wondering about that woman

And what she would do

When she was tired of cards, and him. . . .

When he come home that night,

It was early;

And he was solemn and slow as a hearse;

He saw me looking at him

With one eye over the pillow

Where I lay on my side in bed;

It made him perk up a little,

Like everything was all right

And the same as usual.

"Did she throw you down. . . .?" I asked.

I learned to play cards, after that. . . .

Psssh!

OUR NEW HOUSE

“Findin’ money,
That means luck!”
Len bends to pick up the copper,
Lying sullenly on the side walk;
A strange light in his eyes,
A haunted gleam of divination and of prophecy
Running beneath his bushy eyebrows,
Like a forest fire.
He reads the copper’s date and laughs:
“The date is even, too;
And that’s luck!
I’ve been looking for a sign
Ever since we decided on buying the house;
I woulda sold it again
If I hadn’t found this.
I was afraid it wasn’t goin’ to be lucky
Buying the house,
Out of all our savings.”
I don’t suppose Len knows exactly
What he is talking about,
But I saw this in his eyes when him
And me signed the mortgage
On the house
As if we’d bought and payed for it
Together.

Len didn't say anything,
But I saw him.
I was going to sign my name—Mrs. Len——
Like he always wanted me to—
As if when he married me
I lost all that belonged to me.
But when I took the pen, the lawyer said,
“Your maiden name first, you know.”
Yes, I know—Belle, not Mrs.——
I didn't have to look at Len,
I knew just what was showing on his face:
His wife in her own name
Signing herself to an equal share
In his property,
We had saved for
So many years.
I'm glad Len has found his lucky cent
And we can keep our house.

NUMBERED

A real home at last;
Ours, not some other person's, ours.

To-day we buy it after all these years
Of waiting and moving like bothered insects
From place to place.

It's as high as I'll ever get, I guess,
In this life—this house:

Frame, two floors, and basement,
One of forty all alike;

“Which is which?” Well, the one
You'll see me coming out of,
That is ours; I know it by the number;
That nineteen feet of width is ours
After all these years.

So many feet and no more, because the builder
Had so much money and wanted more,
So he lopped off a foot on nineteen houses
And added them to the twentieth
To give it a side yard and a garage,—
Himself a little more money when he sold it.
Why shouldn't he?

There was no one to stop him;
Not the city he cramped by so much;
Not the banks he borrowed from;
Not the men who worked with him;
Nobody.

So many men all alike;
When I meet them in heaven

I shall put numbers upon them
So I can tell them one from the other ;
Bankers and builders and city inspectors.

OUR MANTEL-PIECE

Oh, it's all right for that oldest boy of mine
To talk about fire-places,
But not for me,
Or Len either for that matter :
We know too much about them,
Freezing your back and scorching your face ;
We had to live with them once,
Up the River.
As Len says, "It's comfort ;
It ain't looks you want."
That's why I have nothing to say
When that boy talks as he will,
Like every man I ever heard of,
About the kind of fire-place we got :
With its register to let the heat in ;
Set all around with shiny brown tiling ;
And above, the red-stained mantel-piece,
And then on top, a nice big looking-glass ;

And up each side a round red column
Reaching from the floor most to the ceiling
Where a cross-piece joins them,
Like it was the front of a Greek temple.
I think it looks nice;
Anyway it don't let cold air
Sweep down the chimney,
But the boy laughs and says it would make
A fine reredos for a beer saloon bar,
Whatever that means,—
Says if Alice went through that looking-glass
She'd find herself in a land
Where everybody looked like the people
In a wooden Noah's ark;
Where every little girl bought her hair
Ready curled for her at the carpenter's,
Who would be turning out
Wooden legs on his lathe.
One day he thought he would better it, I guess,
For he brought home a little statue,
"The Wingèd Victory of Somothrace," he said;
And put it on the top ledge.
It was there when Len come home;
He just looked at it
And gave one of his sniffs:
"The boy I suppose?"
I nodded, and he was silent.

Next Saturday Len was late;
When he come in he had something
Wrapped up in a newspaper;
He didn't say nothing,
But went right in alone to the parlor.
Later I went to see what he had done,
And there beside the Victory
Was standing a bust of Lincoln.
Let them fight it out, I thought,
And kept still.
"Go up and take a look at the mantel-piece,"
Said Len, when the boy came home.
He went in and come back;
And he didn't say anything.
That's more than I could stand.
"S'pose you two get it out
And done with," I said.
"Well," says the boy,
"The Lincoln's a dead chalky white,
The Victory's a creamy ivory tint:
How does it look?"
"People won't notice that
When they see something
That means something," says Len,
"And Lincoln means something."
"So does the Victory, something beautiful—"
"Beauty be darned," says Len.

"Well, it's your house," says the boy.

" 'Tain't that, either," says Len.

"Well, Lincoln's all right, but the bust,
Machine made, must be one of a thousand,
All alike," says the boy.

"Where would we be

If it wasn't for the machine?" says Len;

"When I want a thing done right,

I get a machine to do it;

You can't a man;

And what's more, a man can only do so much,

But a machine—

I learned to cradle oats when I was a boy,

Up the River.

Maybe it looked nice and all that—

The men follerin' each other

Slantwise across the yellow field,

Swingin' back and forth as they go,

Like solid music you could see,

From sun-up to sun-down.

It sounds nice,

But the nicest part

Was when you come to the corner

Where the spring was,

With the jug of egg-nog hidden in it—

My, but that was good!

And then Maw standin' on the hill

Callin' us to dinner—

I can hear her yet, thin and clear and good.

But work!

It took us two days

To do what the reaper does in two hours!

Could us men beat the machine,

As it goes flashing sure and steady

Into the standing grain

That stops and shivers and swishes down

Before the swift, sure clickering

Of steel on steel,

Making your pulse leap to keep in beat,

Drowning out the clattering harvest fly.

Give me the machine!

Where would the cities be without it?"

"Starved to hell where they ought to be,"

Says the boy, "but this isn't a question

Of food and plenty,

But art and individuality—character."

"It took art to make that Lincoln bust,

And as for the other thing,

I like you to show me more of it

Than Lincoln stands for.

As far as the color goes,

I couldn't help that;

That's the only kind of Lincoln I could get;

Your Victory ain't so perfect either—

Where's her head?"

Len's right about the head.

When the Ladies' Aid meets at my house

I can see them feeling sort of sorry for me

Because they think I broke it dusting

And don't want to afford to get another:

They think I go out of my way

If I try to explain about the head.

HIS AND MINE

"We got money in the bank."

"We ain't—You have."

"Some of it's in your name, Belle."

"It ain't either, Len, it's in your name

And in trust for me."

"What's mine is yours."

"Tain't, I can't draw it out

Unless you say so."

"Ain't you got everything we can afford?"

"But if I really had it,

Maybe I could afford something different."

"If I let you spend money

Like you wanted to,

We'd never saved enough for a house;
And how could I know when I'd lose my job,
Or get sick;
I ain't getting younger;
Got to be ready for all those things."
"Yes, but how would you like
Coming to me like you was a child
Asking me for money
Every time you needed a new hat.
I have to keep after you so long
I'd just as soon go bare-headed
As ask you again."
Len don't say anything more,
He knows I'm right;
Only I wish I didn't feel
Like when you go to bed
And you think you've locked the door
Like you always do but yet ain't sure
And have to get up again.
I can't be sure I'm right.
His folks and mine,
When they married gave everything they had
Each to her husband,
Who turned it into a farm
That fitted them both
Like an oxen's yoke,
Taking every sinew's stretch and pull

While it held them side by side
Up the selfsame road.
I don't really know just what Len has to do;
He comes home and goes to work again;
His smile or frown
Is but the shadow of some happening
In his day
That reaches through the city
Till it touches me.
And like he says,
If he had spent the money
I wanted him to
We wouldn't have a home now.
But we can only be young once,
And I may never be old.

THE EXPOSITION

Well, we've been and gone, Len and me,
Up to Buffalo,
Where they're having the Pan-American Exposition
Saw the Falls, too.
It was one of those things
You hear so much about

Till you just up and do it, too,
See a lot of things,
Get all tired out, and come back again;
So you can say you've got that much done
In your life-time, anyway.
But it was loveliest just sitting still
At the end of a long day's seeing things
In the little park beside the grounds
To watch the lights come on
To make a dizzy city like music
Of quivering tower and pinnacle and dome
Magically floating in the dark
Over so many people
Walking and talking and laughing—
Then was the time you could really
Take it all in, and breathe deep.
But Niagara Falls was the best
Though it wasn't as big as I thought it was,
But all that foaming water,
With the loveliest rainbows,
That water hurrying, straining, going—
Like a snake looking you in the eyes,
Something monstrous and crawling
And hideous,
Shiny and scaly and glaring,
And terrible;
A fascinating thing like a whispered prophecy

That the world will come to an end
To-night;
That water tugging and pulling you with it,
Till it drives you almost wild,
Till you want to leap and go
With it. . . .

I had to take hold of Len
And hurry away from it
Till only the roar is in your ears
Making you feel
Like you was flying. . . .

"Just think of all that power
Going to waste," says Len;
"Men have gone over that in barrels. . . ."

I was glad to get away. . . .
So we went back to the Fair again
To finish out our four days
Like we had planned—

And met Mr. and Mrs. Watling
Who used to live next door to us;
They had saved up some money
And come, too.

It was good at first
To see two faces you knew
Among so many,
So many that looked at you
As if they knew you

But didn't,—
Only were lighted up by the same light
That brought you there,
Like faces around a bonfire.
But then it wasn't
So good to see them:
They wanted to do everything
In sight,
Like they had saved up for a long time
To come here
And now were ready to spend
Without end—
Said it was their wedding-trip,
Though they had been married so long.
Well, it was our wedding-trip, too;
But Len and me,
We didn't feel that way,
Though we had saved up just like them.
There wasn't sense to it—
Maybe, I'm getting just like Len with money,
I don't know;
But I don't see the good of it,
Waiting till a World's Fair,
Or a war, or a death, or something,
To go out of your way
To do things.
Things you do in a jump like that,

Don't count—
You forget,
Like Jesus Christ coming
To show men
How to cure people
And all that,
And then the world forgetting.
Like Len says:
"You had a good time,
But what have you got?"
I was glad to get home again.

CHURCH

Well, I won't have to stay home from church
To keep Len company, after all:
He has joined himself—
Regular pillar of it;
You should see him standing
Like he had a ramrod down his back,
His face set all one way
Like a steady wind,
While the minister prays
Over the collection-plate Len holds.

I sometimes think

Just then Len's acting he is a pillar really,

He takes things so hard.

It's part of the change that's come over him;

He ain't worrying so much like he used to,

When he was afraid;

Afraid of people and things,

Afraid they would trample him down

With hard work and sickness and old age,

Fling him at last out of the way

As useless.

We've saved some money now:

We won't have to starve

Or go to the poor-house, he says,

If society does get done with him.

So since things are letting up a little,

Len's joined the Church.

But now it's the other one,

That oldest boy of mine:

He wonders why I go to church.

Asks me.

Smiles at the sort of people I meet there;

The chairs and beams stained yellow

Like they were sticky;

The walls, candy pink;

The little cotton-wool clouds above the platform

With crosses and crowns sticking out of them—

Well, he can smile,
But I tell him he can go out and find people
To meet; I can't.
I got to take what I can get
Nearest me—in the church on the corner.
If I stop going to church,
What chance have I to know people?
Not
That I want so much to meet
The young doctor and his wife,
Just waiting till I get sick
So he can ask fresh questions about myself,
Tell me to stick out my tongue;
Or meet that talkative undertaker
Who joined the church
So he could put his name in black and gold
Beside the door
Just opposite the minister's—
I know him:
We've joked so much together;
He's waiting till he can get me dead,
And chuckle, like he does,
Because I'm so stout
And funny to look at
Without any clothes on.
Not that I want to meet these people,
Or our Minister

Who putters so importantly
Around us women.
Oh, I'm on to him, poor man,
But it's the other women I meet
I go to church for:
We have such good times together;
That's all we have for living—
Mostly.

THE CANAL

Mrs. Kriegel, next door,
Her boy has just come back
From working on the Panama Canal.
All these months she's been worrying about him;
She didn't want him to go;
"But children these days,
You can't do nothin' with them," she says,—
"He should have stayed up here
Where I could watch him;
And he got a good job;
But would he stay?
Not him!
Just as soon as he got a chance,

Off he went;—

And now I should worry my head off about him,

Where he's layin' in the hospital

With something he got down there,

Tellin' me he'll be all right, soon.

It doesn't seem to pay no more,

To bring children up,

I declare it don't."

It doesn't make Mrs. Kriegel

Pleasant to talk to;

Of course, the Canal sets Len off,—

Waving his newspaper in his hand:

"Think of it;

Cuttin' a continent in two;

If that ain't History,

Weddin' the Atlantic to the Pacific. . . ."

"Mrs. Kriegel's Willy was waiting to get married,

But now she ain't thinking much

Of wedding bells," I tell him.

"Well," he says,

"That's one way of looking at it.

If he'd a stayed up here,

Maybe he'd be just as bad,

You can't tell.

But now he's helped build the Canal,

And that's worth a hull lot."

"Lot of good that does Mrs. Kriegel!"

“Yes, but he might ’a been killed right there;
There ain’t a tunnel, nor a sewer,
That a man don’t get killed
Or injured for life,
Only we don’t hear about them.
It’s the battle of progress
That’s what it is—Progress,
And maybe Willy got restless up here
Doing the same thing,
Over and over again,
In building after building,
With no excitement
But getting home late for supper;
Maybe he saw a chance to be near something big,
And took it.
Why, if I’d a been young
And had no family
I’d a gone,
Makin’ History;
Why, it’s the Eighth Wonder
Of the World. . . .”
Poor Len,
There’s been so many Eighth Wonders
In his time.
The first one I can remember,
Was the son,
Who had just been born to him,

However, the Canal's finished,
And Mrs. Kriegel's boy is dead.

LEAVING ME

My first-born—
He is gone to another city.
To-day is just like yesterday, I know,
But it isn't so to me:
Even the sun, somehow,
Lies more still upon the kitchen floor,
A paler yellow, like old gold,
Old gold—
Old—it seems to match my loneliness.
He went this morning;
Looked back at the street-corner;
I waved my hand;
Smiled above the strangle in my throat—
Gone to find his work to do;
Gone gladly, gone smiling,
Gone with my heart a-reaching after him
Like a kneeling, blue-eyed penitent
Clinging to the invisible robes of his God.
My heart, and I don't think he knew

How much it ached:
Why should he know?
His future throbs before him
Like distant summer lightnings;
My future goes with him,
Walking silently
Like Christ upon the waters.
The faded sun climbs to my knee
Comfortingly, as I sit here.
Oh, I knew he must go sometime,
But you know how the ache is,
Like a tawny road,
Among the hills, under the sun,
Stretching endlessly and naturally.
Gone.
So that is over and done with;
Broken, the spell of childhood,
That gleamed like turning bubbles
I would not touch,
As it hung before me
On the threads of my yearning,
Magically silken.
Gone.
Other mothers envied me,
And they told me so;
When they saw us arm in arm
Going down the street,

Talking and laughing together,
Companions completely.
The pale sun is creeping from my lap,
Pathetically still,
Like it was a child
I had hurt with my neglect.
I am so alone,
And yet:
Shall he not see me and my smile,
Beside him, far going,
Into the City of a new romance?
“Many a man has done better,
Out in the great world,
Because a woman’s heart
Has gone with him—”
I copy it from a book,
And put it away. . . .
Len must be given credit, too:
He understands, to-night,
And leaves me alone.

HE KNEW ME

The river boat doesn't change much,
With its red plush and gilt and white,
The polished brass and the queer pleasant smell,
Like a machine strong and clean.

I am on my way up the River for a visit;
Len let me off for a few days,
Alone.

I suppose he thinks I am safe now,
With my years and faint yellow on my cheeks
Where I burnt it with a hot flannel
Trying to cure an aching tooth
After my babies came.

Once I was proud of my slender waist;
Not now though—

I just don't think how big it is.

Up the River again, the boat of long ago!

Slowly I take the saloon stairs:

Strange how doing something different makes me
feel;

I want to laugh right out in church,
But I don't:

These people who do this traveling so often
They'd think I was queer.

A young man is coming down the stairs;
I look up—a stranger to me.

He looks at me
Till our eyes meet.
He knows me!
Like men used to know me on the street
When I was young and they caught my eye.
"My goodness! He knows me!"
I want to shriek mockingly at him,
Or at myself, I don't know which,
"My goodness! At my age!
If Len could see me now!"
I smile at him and pass on—
The nice boy.
He knew me;
Me who thought I should never see that look again
In the eyes of a man.
Out on the after-deck
I sit and watch the dusk
Swirling over the city and harbor
Like vapors of witchery,
With a million unreal stars
Crinkling in the filmy curlings;
Down the harbor, the jade goddess
With an insufficient topaz in her hand;
Over there on the farther shore beside her
The mist has made a Moslem temple
Out of a rounded roof and four tall chimneys,
Magically, like the Mosque of St. Sophia

In Constantinople.

Here nearer me heart-lifting Manhattan,
Towering upward majestically
Like a huge frigate of mystery,
With every foot of canvas crowded onto her!
All this to see,

But only this to run in my mind,
Like a brook in the night—

He knew me;

At my age he knew me.

Of course, I should have frowned

Not smiled,

And passed him by.

But why?

My City is the acre and the garden of humanity,
And I am in it.

The glancing eye and desire of men and women
Are as natural as the clinging of pollen

In acre and garden

When the bee comes,

Or the falling of it where it will

When the gentle-motioned breasts of the wind

Press and billow the close-standing wheat

With slow sweet ecstasy.

Heart and soul are farmer and gardener

In my City.

They shall not scoundrelize the law

That makes the glances cling and fall
Where they can and must;
They shall only say
What two of us shall stand together
When the message falls.
He knew me as he should,
And we passed on as we should;
I guess Len ain't hurt none.
Like as not he'll be standing
To-morrow or next day
In a crowd of other men
In front of one of those windows
Where there are pictures of women
With luxuriously swaying breasts
And soft in-curving hips
Tangling the senses in the veils of delusion;
Or girls pictured bending down temptingly
While they "Put Money in the First National
Bank,"
Into their stockings beneath the garter.
To-morrow or next day
He will turn to watch an ankle
Above high heels
That throw the love-teasing curves
Of a satyr into a woman's hips.
He will turn, just as I and other women will
To see how she dresses to make men look at her;

So we can do it, too.
At least, I turn for that;
I don't think other women
Have anything on me.
I can tell that by Len,
And his tired neck,
Every time he comes back from a walk.
Women have been practising their charms;
And he has turned his head to see.

THANKSGIVING DINNER

We always bow our heads before we eat,
A habit maybe more than anything.
But it's the way Len and me was taught
Up the River.
Down here I don't suppose they do it any more;
It don't seem natural
As there, where God is so close to you
In every field and wood,
Speaking to you down from Blue Mountain,
Haunting you with drought, or thunder,
Holding you in the hollow of His hand
Like the dominie says.

Here—I don't know,
It does seem like it is some one man
You are really beholden to,
Who sticks himself between you
And your working fellowship with God.
And it does make you feel a little cheap
To bow your head
With a feeling of them both at once:—
Your Boss—and God.
So the city people don't,
And we have changed it, too,
Doing it silently.
But up the River,
The oldest man at table
Prays aloud;
Down here we've come to do it silently,
So that's the reason I'm so startled,
This Thanksgiving Time,
When with all the children here,
Len bows his head—
His voice coming harsh as a knotted cord,
Jerked through an open wound—
And prays aloud,
Because I who have been very sick,
Am well and safe again.
“. . . we thank, Thee, Lord,
Amen.”

The silent moment after
Plucks at every nerve of me,
Till they seem to twang.
I look up, dazed,
As if I had just been terribly hurt
By a heavy blow I didn't see.
I know my eyes are wide and red;
In the children's eyes, too,
There's a stricken look,
That stays,
Until Len takes up the carving-knife,
To make it ring against the fork
While he recites again:
As he always does before he carves:
"The Turk awoke, that bright dream was his last."
After dinner my oldest boy comes and asks me:
He has been away and so he doesn't know
How really bad I was
When I was in the hospital.
And then I tell him.
Oh, I suppose I hadn't ought to,
But I always do talk to him like this;
I can't help it and he understands;
I tell him how his father used to come,
Night after night to my bed-room door,
With a letter partly written in his hands,
To the home folks;

How he'd take a look at me ;

Nod :

Then go back to the desk in the hall,

And finish.

He never told me why he looked into my room first

Always before he closed his letter ;

But I knew.

It made me feel so good,

As if I wasn't much to him,

More than a final piece of news:—

“Dead” or—“Still alive”—

Before he licked the envelope.

“But mother, that's only his way ;

He must love you,

Or he wouldn't have prayed so terribly

As he did to-day.”

I look sharply at the boy,

Him standing there

With a side-long glance at me

Like he was ashamed

To take his father's part this way.

“Oh, I suppose so :

But he might do things different—

I'm his wife ;

I ain't a public institution.”

MY SON'S HOME

His home and his own wife,
My son's;
Only a few years ago
And who should have thought it,
Surely not me, his only mother;
But you never can tell.
My boy's own home:
Just being here makes me happy—
The warmth of an Indian Summer noon
Is round about my heart;
A golden quiet in my ears
Like dusk upon the city
At the end of holiday.
She is a good girl, his wife,
Like I'd pick for him myself;
And I was so afraid of those other women
He knew before he married her:
Those old maids blooming toward him
Like a late wild rose in September,
Making him all set up about himself,
Fussing over him as if they
Were more to him than me.
And then those other queer women, young,
With queer stage names that sound
Like hair you've frizzed and curled—

Oh just women with paint on their cheeks,
Cupid lips that weren't real.

Len, he used to fuss about them;

"Your father's right," I'd tell the boy,

But I was like the hen

Who hatched a duck:

I couldn't warn him from them;

If I did he'd laugh and ask me

If I thought they would marry him,

For he wasn't going to marry

And he was safe with them—

They were ambitious, too.

"A man ought to marry," I said.

"On what," he said, "the wages I get?"

"It's more than your father and me

Started in on,

And many a nice girl would be glad to—"

"Your nice girls—try to talk to them—

Nobody home;

Or they're sick or weak or something—

And while we're on that—tell me this:

Why has virtue a bad breath?"

"That ain't true—always!"

But his saying he wouldn't marry—

Like as not water runs up hill:

I knew I only had to wait,

Till they met each other,

She'd get him, if she wanted to.
We all come to it, like Len and me;
I can't say it's been all roses,
But maybe it wasn't Len's fault
Or mine:
We did the best we could.
The city is hard
As a gravel walk to naked feet,
And love and marriage is such a naked thing
Exposed to everything that
Wants to touch it;
If you grow hard to things outside it,
You grow hard to each other,
Just like Len and me growing older
Where things don't count so much
As they used to.
We're just growing like the two cedars
Side by side in the same crack
In the lime-stone ledge
Back of the barn up the River—
Been there ever since I can remember;
From the road they look like one tree,
But they're not;
Only the sides away from each other
Have grown;
The sides towards each other haven't,
So together they make a perfect cone

With one point against the sky.
But not marry? Him!
Like sugar and water
With every girl that ever noticed him.
Not marry—after me bringing him up
So he'd make a good husband
For some nice girl
Who could overlook his selfish ways,
Because she loved him.
Well, now she's got him
And I'm glad.
I always said I wouldn't be jealous
Like some mother-in-laws,
And I won't be.
I want them to be happy,
I got so little of it myself.
But her telling me how nice he is,
It don't sit right with me,
As if I didn't know it.
Wait till things go wrong,
Or he begins to show his selfishness,
Then we'll see who knows how nice he is—
Me or her.
But Len he's fussing again,
Wants to know when
He's going to have grandchildren.
I tell him "to hush up

And mind his own business.”

“Well, ain’t children

The object of marriage?”

Well, it might be, but does the Spring

When it marries the earth in April

Ask about the object?

I don’t think so.

Leastwise, I never heard it,

And I lived pretty near to them

Once up the River.

I can wait:

I’ve done that before.

MY LITTLE GIRL

I don’t want it,

But she half wants to;

And I suppose she will—

Go away from me to school,

So far from me, she can’t come home each day.

Oh! I suppose it’s only coming back at me

How I fought Len

To let our boy keep on at school

Instead of going to work

To bring in money ;
And then he went away,
And now she wants to—
My last baby,
My daughter I was bringing up
To be a help and a companion to me.
Never.
I can't !
I am growing old.
And I want her near me.
But I suppose she will.
I feel so still inside and waiting,
Like you do sometimes
In a winter's twilight
When the sun is on the hill
And the moonlight on the snow.

GROWN UP

When they grow up
They're no use to you any more,
Children ain't.
Go away and leave you
Or get educated away from you,

Making you feel as hard and lonely
As a deserted quarry
That you drive fast by
On a night in the dark of the moon.
Oh, well,—
Seems like children grow up,
And husbands down,
Leaving you all alone right here—
Not that Len doesn't say
He loves me and all that. . . .
But my children are getting away from me;
Now I can see them yonder, before me.
Sometimes they turn,
And wave their hands
Back at me;
I smile and laugh
And call gleefully,
Like a girl—I know I ain't,
But it's no use—no use.
I am here.
They are there.
They don't seem to know
How I'm straining
Just to keep them in my sight.
They don't; they don't.
Oh, I can turn back to Len,
But that ain't enough.

And what makes it worse,
Len knows it, too.
I can't help it.
The birds are flying south now,
Up the River.
I wish I could go with them
And end it all.

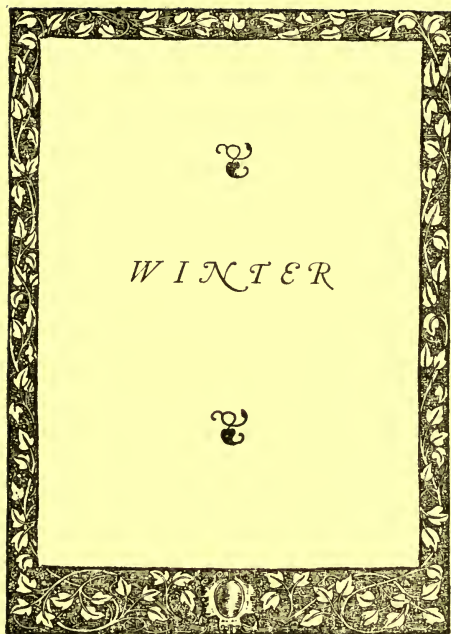
FOR MY AGE

I wish they would write something for me
At my age;
Seems like every book I read
Is for young people—
A many-colored romance
With them walkin' through
Like the sun through the earliest mists of morning,
Just as it was when I first come down the River.
Don't the writers think of me
And my kind at forty-five?
There is more beauty in the world
Than the passionate slenderness
Of youth,
Like a blossom swooning to be mated

By the free-loving winds
Or bees that hum and hover over.
The world is just as full of my age:
The hips and breasts grown full;
The lisomeness of me passed
Into the children about me;
Romance running like a brook
Through the Promised Lands of memory;
A strange autumnal awaiting;
An Indian Summer of things that are;
And the things that are not
Like far flying birds down the sky,
Remote and songless and passing;
In me a certainty,
An eerie desperation;
The autumn of me, crouching, crouching, crouching
For its leap into the winter of life.
Oh, why don't they write books for me at my age?
Fulfilment is as beautiful
As expectation.
It must be.
Or isn't it—
In the eyes of God
Who sees the rounded plan?
I wish they would write gloriously
Of the yesterdays that rose
Swift and slow

To Now,
When the pulse beats cool
And satisfied
With just being so near
You can touch each other if you want to.
Not write always
Of the Now that cries passionately
For to-morrow and to-morrow and to-morrow
When the yearning in the loins
Of man and maid
Shall be crushed to silence.
But the writers don't seem to be interested
In my age.
And I am hungry—more than a girl
Who knows what she's a hunger for;
But I—I don't know.
I have been through all that;
There is something beyond. . . .
The books—they don't tell me;
Nor the City;
Len sprucing up as he grows older,
Trying to dress
Like a gentleman of the old school
Like he read somewhere,
With white bow-tie
And—oh well, and legs
That, too, are slightly bowed,

Now that his years bear down,
And he touches with his finger
Every other post we pass
In the street.



DAUGHTERS-IN-LAW

And so they are married, my boys.

I said I never would interfere

Between them and their wives,

And I don't.

What we lived through, Len and me,

Has gone to seed,

And all we can ask of our children now

Is love.

The world before Len and me is a hill

Covered with the purple and blue

Of the wild asters of our autumn,

Standing more and more chilly

In the shortening afternoons

That lead to the quiet hearth-fires

Of peace and comfort

And shadows on the wall.

Our children's world is like a road

Winding into early June,

Where the wild rose is swaying sweetly

And in the bronze green hedge above them

Snaps the first pink of the laurel

Like sugared pop-corn on a Christmas tree;

A dizzy buoyancy is in their sky,
Where the morning flush is flitting
Like a humming-bird
Toward the enchanting silver of a crescent moon.
Now, how would I look,
Coming down their road to meet them
With my advice for wives?
Of course they do most things different
From the way I would do them;
But things are changing all the while—
I don't suppose me and my ways
Are any more like their wives,
Than my boys are like their wives' own fathers
And their ways.
I brought them up to be better husbands
Than Len,
That's all I could do.
Maybe it wasn't quite enough,
When I see how baffled they are
Because their wives are not well,
As if I never was that way.
It is just something
Men don't seem to understand;
I couldn't tell them how bad I felt
All during the first years of my married life—
And children don't see those things,
Just felt I was harsh and short with them—

But I used to just live
Till I could get them off to school
So I could throw myself on the bed and cry.
I got as much right to vote as Len,
But I wish Susan B. Anthony
And the rest of those women back there
Had started out to spend as much time
Making a woman's married life
Easier and happier for her.
So though we are just in-laws,
Some things aren't different after all,
And it seems strange,
Each time I see them,
I find myself liking them better.

THE CITY

The avenue is so crowded you can't get by,
And every street's a mill-race
That pours into it a tumbling swirl of people.
Len and me are good as lost,
Though of course he won't let on to that.
I wish I hadn't come;
All I can do is stand still,

Just one of a dark mob
Clenched as tight together as a fist.
I didn't realize there was so many people
In the City,
Of course, if I'd stop to think about—
Suddenly,
Something gets a grip on us,
Makes us tense,
And holds us;
A seething wave of expectancy
Is passing down the stream of us.
Listen!
They're coming now, the soldiers,
All of them, the boys of the City, in khaki,
The City's boys, the City's. . . .
Here they come!
Down the dark, thick stream of us
Rides again a licking flame
Of tumult this time,
A roar that leaps upon us
Like a fire in the bush,
Leaps and passes on
But leaves a tense excitement
Smoldering in us here.
There they go,
Passing, passing.
The steady step of them,

Holds you fascinated,
And hurt
Somewhere deep inside you,
But glad too,
And proud.
Dazed I look around me;
The crowds are like a dream of mine,
Something part of me
I understand and yet do not,
For I am in it, too.
I turn again to
The soldiers,
Stepping, stepping, stepping;
I feel like some great door had opened
And they were passing through,
Steadily, certainly, silently.
The cheers rise, and fall, and rise,
And yet, and yet. . . .
Oh, behind it all I feel
A great deep, silence—
The City like a kneeling woman,
Her idle hands under her breasts,
Knitted in the hard intensity of her feelings,
Her hot bright eyes staring,
Staring at the passing of her boys
As they go to help her sister
Cities of France,

Hated and stricken by that hate. . . .
Len and I push out of the crowds;
Behind us the coiled electric hum of them;
Farther and farther the pulse of carried drums.
“You know, Len,” I begin
Distantly in my mind
Till the thought reaches my lips
As if it weren’t mine:
“You know, it seems like
I’m seeing the City
For the first time in all these years.”
“Seeing?” He leans toward me
With the puzzle in his eyes;
He doesn’t hear like he used to;
So I turn to speak a little louder,
But he asks, “Just what was it you did see
All these years down to the City?”
So he had heard me after all;
He’s like that sometimes,
But I don’t explain; I can’t
Without his thinking me complaining
Because he isn’t rich.
Anyway he wouldn’t understand
How I’ve waited and waited for the City
To make me feel at home,
As if it belonged to me
And I belonged to it:

As if it wasn't just a catalog
That took my age and name and sex
To forget about me till the next time came.
How I waited wistful like a barren woman
Hungry for children at her breasts;
Waited—and then to-day—
Found the City.
Found it—and me a part of it.
Found it and felt me close against its heart:
Found it, seems like, because I had stopt waiting
For it to come to me,
Going out myself to find the City;
Flinging into the fire of its being
When the khaki-clad went by,
Feeling as it felt, sad and glad.
Guess I've stayed at home too much,
Being at home behind Len's back,
Walking down the path of his mind,
Indian-squawing for him.
That's just living
With the kind of man I married up the River
But it ain't living
With the City of my choice.
Me and Len and the children—
That is the work of the Fifth Day
In the written calendar of God:
The coming of Life on Earth.

But me and the City—
That is the work of the Sixth unfinished,
The making of Life in His Image.
But seems like I don't get in on the finish
Of the week of Creation
Because I waited like a woman for the wooing.
Well, I'll know next time—
If there is a next time—
And I'm born a woman.

MY BIRTHDAY

Foolish! but it felt good
To have them like that,
The whole churchful,
Because it was my birthday
And I was president of the Ladies' Aid.
Had a special entertainment,
They did;
Fooled me right up to the last moment;
Said I must be sure to come,
That was all.
I wondered why they got so friendly
All at once

Like a child wishing for candy:
Two of them come along to see me
Right up to my house,
The night of the entertainment,
Just dropped in, they said;
Wondered what dress
I was going to put on:
That nice new one of mine, they hoped;
When we got there,
Just inside the doors,
All of a sudden
The Church was alive
With white handkerchiefs
Fluttering at me like pigeons
Like you see them
In that picture
In front of the big church
They have in Italy;
Fluttering, waving, flashing at
Me,
At me,
Because it was my birthday
And they liked me. . . .
Hope nobody caught any colds
When they waved like that
But it was good to have them do it,
Though it made me kind of dizzy then

And like I didn't weigh at all
In a world of welcome
So wide there wasn't any
Edge to it.
And it hurt in my throat,
But it was like the strangle
Of a lover's coming
You haven't seen
Forever and ever so long.
But Oh, for a moment I stood
In the high places glad with God.
Yea, though I walk in the valley
Of the shadow of death,
I shall fear no evil,
For there shall They be with me,
They whom I know for God;
Yea, though I travel a high-road
Full in the straight-down sun,
Them do I want beside me,
Them, for They are God. . . .
I hunger and thirst for You,—
People;
I pulse and throb for You,—
People;
I live for and dream of You,—
People;
You who are God;

For You do my tissues soften,
For You do I reach to the stars;
And I shall be faithful, faithful to You
Always and always;
No Christ shall come between us,
Oh my People, Who are God. . . .
People, believe me, People,
I love You, love only You,
Love You, and want You, and need You. . . .

A WAITING CITY

I know Len is home by now,
Waiting with that worried look of his
As if I'd get lost or something
Even though I am only returning late
From the store where we of the Red Cross work.
To me as I walk home in the twilight—
All luminous blue and creamy ivory,
Making me think of the ancient ivories
I saw one holiday in the Art Museum—
To me, and I don't know why it is
The City seems to be waiting,
Waiting stilly in the lovely twilight—

More quiet now on the eve of Memorial Day
Than it will be on the morrow
After the morning comes softly in;
After the sudden echo of rifle and bugle-call
That early mass in salutation of the dead;
With then the day itself to celebrate
As the City will, you know:
Let out from work like boys from school.
But now this twilight hour
The City is so still,
Bides the coming dawn—
Its message from across the world at war. . . .
Wait, my heart; and rest a while;
Your world is on its knees in prayer;
Sing low, dear soul, to me,
Look you down the years
The while my heart is blind for tears;
Look you down the years.
To-morrow's blue-clad veterans who will stand
Above the green-turned mounds
Upon a thousand hills
Are old and few.
Yes, look you down the years,
And in the midst of them,
Tell me what you see:
Another fellowship,
Another dim great company,

That halts when the phantom bugle sounds,
Upon a thousand shadowed hills
And passes, passes on.
Oh heart of me, this too the City knows,
This twilight hour,
While it waits so still,
Holding this hush against its heart.

IN A ROW

He does not come;
I am lying here;
Sick and alone.
Is that my boy's step in the hall?
Is it:
While my heart stirs,
Like a child in my arms?
No—not yet.
My pillow is hot to my cheek;
I must be hearing things:
I want to see my boy so.
Only a narrow ribbon of sky to see
Between the window top
And the edge of the roofs across the yards,

So many houses there, all in a row
Like years that have turned their backs on me;
I could count them,
But what's the use.
Like years, silent now;
They don't know,
And I am sick, and tired.
Why do they put so many things
In a row, and just alike?
Maybe he will come next Sunday.

UP THE RIVER

Up the River.

Seems like

Romance that was not in life

Is in death.

The cold winds fluming down from Blue Mountain,

Under the moon, cold and old;

The cockney voice of the minister in prayer,

Clear in the icy darkness

Beyond the smoky lanterns;

Under the empty tree. . . .

The murmur in the aching shadows,

“Dust to dust—”

God—ah God!

Begun a long journey;

Among the stars a new voice,

And a waiting.

Laughter unforgotten.

Blue Mountain is silent.

The shadows trail away.

Up the River. . . .

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